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**ENHANCING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY: A STUDY OF  
STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY POLICY AND  
ITS TRANSLATION INTO UNIVERSITY STRATEGY**

**By**

**ROY PRIEST**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Warwick,  
Centre for Education Studies**

**OCTOBER 2016**

To my parents

Cyril and Dorothy Priest

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## **DECLARATION**

This is to declare that this thesis is my own work and it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Roy Priest

October 2016

## SUMMARY

The extent to which universities should prepare graduates for the workplace has been a particular focus of policy impacting across higher education over the last 20 years as a result of a number of factors: changes to ways in which higher education is funded in the UK and the subsequent cultural shift towards students being perceived as consumers of degree courses; ease of access to the results of metrics by which universities can be compared; the pace of technological change in the workplace and the impact that this has had on the requirements of employers when recruiting graduates.

Various reports have focused on attempting to distil the key qualities and skills that employers are looking for when recruiting graduates. How such skills related to employability can or should be enhanced as part of a degree experience are the source of debate at a policy level and amongst academic staff.

In the midst of this perceived cultural shift in higher education it is important to explore the perspectives of key stakeholder groups: individuals working at policy level, academic staff, students and employers. This study explores these issues in a particular setting, BSc Music Technology-oriented courses. Such highly vocational degrees offer an opportunity to investigate perceptions in the context of courses that typically highlight the development of skills and attributes carefully aligned to the requirements of employers.

Following a qualitative methodology, this research investigates the perspectives of stakeholders through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a survey.

One of the key findings of this study is that there is a disconnect between espoused policy which emphasises ever greater integration between industry and higher education and the reality as experienced by academics, students and employers.

The findings highlight the need for improved channels of communication and in particular, the value of informal interactions.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AGR	Association of Graduate Recruiters
AS	Acoustical Society
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
CMA	Competition and Markets Authority
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education
EHE	Enterprise in Higher Education
ESECT	Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEAR	Higher Education Achievement Report
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIPR	Higher Education Initial Participation Rate
IOA	Institute of Acoustics
KIS	Key Information Sets
LEPs	Local Enterprise Partnerships
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
NVQs	National Vocational Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
PDP	Personal Development Planning
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SMEs	Small to Medium size Enterprises
TQEF	Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund
UCAS	Undergraduate Courses at University and College
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills

## **GLOSSARY**

Post-1992 / 'Modern' universities

Former polytechnics, central institutions or colleges of higher education that were given university status in 1992, often referred to as 'New Universities'.

'Red brick' universities

Particular civic universities founded in the major industrial cities of Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

'Plate glass' universities

Refers to a group of universities established or expanded in the United Kingdom during the mid-twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

*'Higher education providers need to provide degrees with lasting value to their recipients. This will mean providers being open to involving employers and learned societies representing professions in curriculum design. It will also mean teaching students the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need, including collaborative teamwork and the development of a positive work ethic, so that they can contribute more effectively to our efforts to boost the productivity of the UK economy.'*

(BIS, 2015a, p.12)

The nature of higher education (HE) is evolving in the face of changes to the funding model driving a more consumer-driven approach with a greater emphasis on a return on investment, typically represented by the perceived enhanced career opportunities that a university education can offer. This shift in emphasis has led to an ever greater focus on the importance of enhancing graduate employability over the last two decades.

Writers such as Collini (2011) have commented on a crisis of identity across the HE sector in the UK as this diverse range of institutions continue to adapt.

Whilst some disciplines may struggle to reconcile the balance between unconstrained intellectual exploration and preparing students for the workplace, courses of a vocational nature are typically more aligned to a model that emphasises graduate employability.

There have been many reports exploring what is meant by graduate employability and how the attributes of employability may be enhanced as part of an undergraduate degree:

*'Various research projects have been undertaken to identify such skills and attributes; various initiatives have been undertaken, at national and institutional levels, to attempt to ensure that students "acquire" the requisite skills and develop the desired attributes. The skills and attributes approach dominates both the current practice and the research agenda.'*

(Holmes, 2015, p.220)

The ascendancy of this 'skills agenda' is not without its critics and researchers such as Holmes (2015) and Tomlinson (2010) have offered alternative views, focusing on the development of individual graduate identities.

Evidence of the reconfiguration that is prevalent across the sector can be seen in the development of initiatives such as the HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Record) a national scheme based on the recognition of non-academic achievement, typically related to transferable skills. The increased focus on measuring and comparing the added value that individual courses can potentially offer to students is evident in the introduction of metrics such as Key Information Sets (KIS). This information is based on the reporting of a series of 'success indicators' and is required from all universities. The rise of the consumer-driven approach to higher education is illustrated in the ubiquity of

Unistats, a web tool that facilitates the comparison of data, including that drawn from KIS, from universities and colleges. The success of a course is now also measured and compared to competing courses through the consideration of graduate destinations:

*'The post-graduation employment of those who undertake higher education, through which such enhanced human capital is manifested, has become an increased focus for research, as well as for policy and practice.'*

(Holmes, 2015, p.221)

At the heart of this cultural shift is the move towards ever more outward-facing universities: universities that engage with a full range of stakeholders in the development of courses, individual modules and the design of assessments. The importance of the role of employers in this process has been emphasised. An example of an initiative illustrating the drive towards closer partnership between higher education and employers can be seen in the establishment of organisations such as Creative Skillset by the Sector Skills Council, a body which supports skills and training related to the UK creative industries.

In light of these external pressures, universities are re-evaluating their current practices and considering fundamental changes to the processes by which they design and deliver their offerings. Various universities have launched, or are in the process of devising, their own schemes for recognising transferable skills related to employability which may be standalone initiatives or run alongside



the HEAR. For instance, the University of Nottingham's Advantage Award, the Durham Award at the University of Durham and the Enterprise and Employability Award at the University of Wolverhampton.

Over the years, formal structures born out of governance procedures, which include course validation and accreditation, have developed to encourage and capture the involvement of a range of stakeholders, most notably employers and students, in the evolution of undergraduate provision. Alongside this, informal arrangements such as networking events and placement visits exist within teaching departments, whereby ideas from the commercial world are shared and fed back into course development.

Typically, universities have set the agenda for stakeholder involvement but the radical changes that are now being witnessed across the HE sector call for the reconsideration of the nature of relationships with stakeholders. Crucially, it is important to offer opportunities for stakeholders themselves to discuss how they would like to see their involvement with universities developing in the future.

The preface to the Government-sponsored Wilson Review (2012) states that:

*'Universities are an integral part of the skills and innovation supply chain to business. However, this supply chain is not a simple linear supplier-purchaser transaction; it is not the acquisition of a single*

*product or service. This supply chain is multidimensional, it has to be sustainable, and it has to have quality, strength and resilience. These attributes can only be secured through close collaboration, partnership and understanding between business and universities.'*

(Wilson, 2012, p.ii)

Whilst considerable research into various aspects of graduate employability has been published in recent years, it is important to explore stakeholder perceptions of this dynamic environment and their insight into the implementation of university strategies derived from policy that typically advocates an integrated approach for the enhancement of graduate employability.

My motivation and goals for the thesis research were borne out of my experience as a practitioner and a desire to carry out an in-depth exploration of this area during a period of great change across higher education. I have a personal and professional desire to better understand the issues around graduate employability in order to contribute to the debate in this area.

This highly contextualised study considers the extent of consistency in the perspectives of academics, employers, students and those working at policy level in the context of a specific course type: BSc Music Technology-oriented degrees. As an experienced programme leader and lecturer with a background

in this area, I chose to draw upon my network of contacts in the UK both in the wider academic community and in industry as the context for this study.

Music Technology is a 'broad church'. Boehm quoting Thorley:

*'[...] the degrees around BSc (Hons) Music Technology are seen as being highly vocational, although there is no such job as a 'music technologist'.'*

(Boehm, 2005, p.10)

The content of the courses varies around a different mix of the basic ingredients of art, technology, and science. Graduates may go on to pursue a wide range of careers working:

- in recording studios as sound engineers;
- for companies specialising in live sound;
- as sound designers developing sound for computer games;
- for major record labels e.g. marketing, copyright protection, A&R (Artist and Repertoire);
- in broadcast systems engineering;
- as acousticians.

Entering a course search for Music Technology on the UCAS (Undergraduate Courses at University and College) website in 2016 brings up 98 courses of varying titles. Typically these courses are offered as Bachelor of Arts (BA),

Bachelor of Science (BSc), Bachelor of Engineering (BEng) and Bachelor of Music (BMus). Of these, 31 are BSc courses; the particular course type which is the focus of this investigation.

Links with industry are typically highlighted in course marketing material and as such these courses could be said to be well-aligned to the vision of higher education as espoused by government directives such as the Wilson Review (2012). Through focusing on such unambiguously employability-oriented courses, this study explores how espoused employability policy and its translation into practice is perceived by stakeholders.

The research followed a qualitative methodology as this approach offers the potential to explore perspectives in depth. The research involved gathering rich data from academics and students from five BSc Music Technology-oriented courses at different universities in England. On their respective websites, each of the subject universities highlights a reputation for excellence in terms of university engagement with graduate employability.

Data collection involved the capture of 25 hours of interviews with individuals working at policy level, academics, employers and students. This material was supplemented with an online questionnaire completed by 63 students.

The key research questions were as follows:

- What is understood by graduate employability? To what extent do all stakeholders have a common understanding of the term?
- What are stakeholder perceptions of university employability policy?
- How do stakeholders perceive the ways in which employability policy is translated into university strategy?

The exploration of stakeholder perceptions of established practice and more recent initiatives, offers insight into how universities may develop meaningful partnerships that can enhance graduate employability in the future.

The overarching emergent finding of this study is that there are issues around communication across the stakeholder groups. Cultural differences between higher education and industry can act as barriers to communication. Whilst there exists an imperative from a policy level for universities to work more closely with employers in order to enhance graduate employability, channels of communication across the stakeholder groups are currently fractured.

University strategies around employability as communicated in mission statements and employability policies do not necessarily reflect the experiences of academics and students. Partnerships with employers can be superficial rather than embedded. Students lack awareness of the particular requirements that companies have of graduates in course-related sectors. Academic staff do not necessarily perceive the credibility of initiatives to reward students for attributes aligned to employability. The study found a lack of awareness of such schemes amongst students and employers.

The findings highlight the need for further research that might facilitate improved communication across stakeholder groups. Such research would call for more detailed analysis of types within stakeholder groups and further exploration of potential barriers to communication. In such a dynamic environment it is important to explore the evolving perceptions of stakeholders and their perspectives as to how higher education may evolve in the future.

## **1.1 Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter 2 explores the extensive research that has been published on the subject of graduate employability starting with consideration of how employability has been positioned as one of the purposes of a university education. Various attempts at defining employability and the requirements of employers are considered. This chapter also explores the university's role in developing these attributes and considers initiatives to formally recognise the achievement of such transferable skills.

An exploration of research into relationships between employers and universities leads to a consideration of stakeholder management. The relative influence of key stakeholders is perceived to be changing and strategies for dealing with key groups in this dynamic environment is seen to be of growing importance.

The literature review ends with a summary of the major themes that inform the conceptual framework.

Chapter 3 outlines the adoption of a qualitative methodology. The research aims are defined and choice of research instruments is justified. The findings of this data collection are considered in Chapter 4. Emergent themes borne out of the comparison of perceptions across the stakeholder groups are explored.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 5 which summarises the implications of this research.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical evaluation of literature that is relevant to this research, including an exploration of the debates around what is meant by employability and how skills and attributes related to this concept can or should be enhanced as part of an undergraduate degree programme. The review of literature has allowed me to identify themes that are central to this study (Oliver, 2004) and to develop my understanding of key aspects to be explored in greater detail (Blaxter et al., 2001).

Graduate employability has been scrutinised from various perspectives, particularly over the last 20 years, and it is important that this thesis considers the fundamental issues; however, key aspects have been explored in greater detail in line with the particular focus of this study. The critical review of literature served to shape the scope of the research area and enabled the development of the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework that structures the research emanates from the literature and becomes a framework which:

*'[...] explains either graphically, or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, variables or constructs – and the presumed interrelationship among them.'*



(Miles and Huberman, 2013,  
p.20)

The development of a conceptual framework for the investigation of issues related to the enhancement of graduate employability led me to focus on an exploration of stakeholder perceptions as the basis for my thesis. As stated previously, the research questions are: What is understood by graduate employability? To what extent do all stakeholders have a common understanding of the term? What are stakeholder perceptions of university employability policy? How do stakeholders perceive the ways in which employability policy is translated into university strategy?

The conceptual framework was developed in order to address the research questions and was informed by the literature review. This process saw the emergence of major themes which needed to be explored in depth supported by minor themes which offered appropriate underpinning knowledge.

The focus of this study is on the comparison of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy. In order to engage with this discussion it is important to explore the evolution of the employability agenda and this is considered as a minor theme. Informed by government directives, one constant of policy-led change in this area is the onus on universities to be outward-facing and to consider the requirements of

industry in terms of the extent to which the 'products' of the higher education system are ready to take up graduate positions in the workplace.

Government-driven changes and the consequential shift in the role of stakeholder groups form the background to this study. The review considers stakeholder management. Universities are required to reflect the needs of a range of stakeholders including government agencies, academics, students and employers. The role of employers as key stakeholders within higher education has risen in prominence and this review reflects on research into how such relationships can best be managed.

Whilst the changing role of stakeholder groups is crucial to the understanding of this dynamic environment, this issue is not central to the exploration of stakeholder perceptions and as such forms a minor theme in the literature review and is not a major focus within the data capture process. However, with the focus of this study being an exploration of perceptions as to how employability policy is translated into university strategy, a key area for this study is how such strategies are perceived by the stakeholder groups.

The basis for the consideration of perspectives is at a philosophical level and an important theme of this research is an exploration of interpretations of the purpose of higher education. This is a key part of the literature review and is a major theme of investigation in the data capture process.

There is no definitive understanding of what is meant by employability (Atkins, 1999) and the review of literature explores this ambiguity. Research into what employers require from graduates is considered. The review reflects a tendency for employer 'wish-lists' of graduate attributes and ongoing lobbying from industry for universities to do more to prepare students for the workplace. Opacity is evident in the exploration of interpretations of employer requirements when recruiting graduates.

The consideration of such ambiguities is a major theme of this study as it can inform discussions around any perceived disconnect between the perceptions of stakeholder groups.

The role of the university in enhancing graduate employability is considered. The research highlights divisions within academia as to how universities should react to the changing environment. More pointedly, the literature review considers how skills related to employability may be developed within the context of an undergraduate degree. The use of models and frameworks is considered and pedagogical approaches are explored. The advantages and disadvantages of teaching aspects of employability via standalone modules or through the adoption of an embedded approach are investigated. The positive impact of work experience and placements on students' personal development is seen to be widely accepted.

The emergence of a more consumer-oriented culture within higher education has been borne out of changes in student funding and the enhancement of systems for the collection, analysis and dissemination of data designed to offer insight into the performance of individual higher education providers. The power of the student as a discerning potential customer is also reflected in the rise of employability as a marketing tool by universities.

Whilst the perceived rise of consumer culture within higher education informs the background to this research it is not central to the exploration of perceptions of university strategies and as such is not a key line of enquiry.

The development of initiatives designed to measure, recognise and/or enhance graduate employability has been driven by a cultural shift in higher education. Individual universities have developed their own systems of reward for demonstrations of 'graduate attributes' and the Government has encouraged rather than mandated, a national system to recognise the employability-oriented skills developed by undergraduates. Stakeholder perceptions of the development of such schemes offers the potential to gain insight into this dynamic area and as such is a major theme of this study. All stakeholder groups were questioned as to their views of such initiatives.

Governments have consistently encouraged closer interactions between higher education and industry and this review explores a range of studies into the issues around employer engagement, highlighting both cultural and structural

problems. The need for brokerage to facilitate university/industry collaboration is discussed.

Issues around interactions between universities and employers are central to this study and this key area is explored both in the literature review and through the collection and analysis of primary data.

## **2.2 Researcher Stance, Assumptions and Approach to the Review of Literature**

Graduate employability is a dynamic topic and has been the subject of Government-driven initiatives, lobbying on behalf of employer groups and pedagogical research. My own stance as a researcher practitioner is that there is great variance in terms of attitudes towards the enhancement of graduate employability, particularly amongst academic staff. In my experience, students tend to have a narrow understanding of employability.

I have experience of on-going interactions with employers, particularly in highly specialised areas related to music technology. Whilst I have witnessed a willingness to interact with universities, feedback from employers suggests that such relationships are underdeveloped and there is much scope for further engagement.

The research for this thesis was carried out over five years from 2011 – 2016 and this period saw continued Government-driven change across the higher education sector. Following the Browne Review (2010) the cap on tuition fees was raised to £9,000 a year in 2012. In the same year data drawn from Key Information Sets (KIS) was published for the first time across England and Wales (HEFCE, n.d.). Developed in response to a Government White paper (BIS, 2011) KIS are standardised sets of data about undergraduate courses designed to allow potential customers the opportunity to gain insight into the performance of particular courses as part of their decision-making process when considering embarking on a degree programme. KIS are mandatory across all HEIs in England and Wales and are easily accessible via individual course websites and a central hub. Data drawn from the National Student Survey (launched in 2005) is one of the metrics incorporated in the KIS (HEFCE, n.d.).

A Government White Paper (BIS, 2016), continues the process of market – driven change across the sector. Legislation borne out of the Paper will see the continued evolution towards an open market through the encouragement of new and alternative higher education providers. Such changes may be seen as indicative of the commodification of higher education (Miller, 2010).

As a Programme Leader I have witnessed university strategies in response to these external developments. My interest is in capturing the perceptions of key stakeholders in this period of great change.

The research sets out to develop a greater understanding of the issues around graduate employability. The focus of the research is in the context of the UK but I have drawn upon international research in this area, in particular from Australia where there has been a sustained focus on graduate employability over a number of years, particularly centred on the work of researchers such as Barrie (2004, 2006).

My initial approach to exploring existing research in this subject area was to interact with the research community through conferences and online forums. Whilst articles in the national press offered insight and suggested avenues for further research, the foundation of the literature review was based on the consideration of articles in established academic journals such as Higher Education, Teaching in Higher Education, Higher Education Research & Development, Journal of Education Policy, Journal of Philosophy of Education and the Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability. Such articles offered insight into a range of contexts and feedback on the evolution of higher education in the UK.

Pivotal Government reports such as Robbins (1963), Dearing (1997) and Lambert (2003) offered insight into the direction of higher education policy and shifting cultural attitudes. Reports published through agencies such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, the Council for Industry and Higher Education, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the UK Commission for

Employment and Skills (UKCES) along with publications from trade organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), supported the general move towards ever greater emphasis on employability in higher education and supported the on-going focus on the need for greater interaction with industry. Reports from these agencies can tend towards the generic and the insight of external expert commentators was vital in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues.

Key researchers and commentators emerged and I explored their published articles and books. Expert critics such as Tomlinson (2010), Collini (2011), Holmes (1995, 2001, 2011, 2015) and Teichler (1998, 2014) counter established attitudes and fuelled my exploration with their insight. The work of Holmes in particular challenged the validity of prevailing assumptions borne out of the 'skills agenda' and opened up further avenues for research.

It was useful to explore publications designed to support universities in their development of strategies for the enhancement of graduate employability from organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Reports such as 'Pedagogy for Employability' (2006 and 2009) published by the HEA drew on research derived from university practitioners. It was useful to consider such research borne out of the findings of embedded practitioners with my own experiences of higher education.



### 2.3 Employability and the Purpose of a University Education

The concept of employability has long been part of the fabric of higher education but the discourse around employability has evolved since the mid-1960s. Cranmer (2006) highlighted that in this period debates centred on the importance of a university education as means by which an individual can fulfil their potential for the benefit of wider society. The Robbins Report (1963) acknowledged four aims of a university education. In summary, such an experience should:

1. provide instruction in the development of skills;
2. promote the general powers of the mind;
3. advance learning;
4. transmit common culture and common standards of citizenship.

A notion of employability is deliberately placed as the first:

*'We begin with instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour. We put this first, not because we regard it as the most important, but because we think that it is sometimes ignored or undervalued.'*

(Robbins, 1963, p.6)

One of the key catalysts for a greater emphasis on enhancing graduate employability at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Dearing Report (1997) which updated the overall aim of higher education to that of sustaining a learning society, with the following four main purposes:

- *'to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;*
- *to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society;*
- *to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels;*
- *to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.'*

(Dearing, 1997, p.72)

The report advocated closer collaboration between universities and industry and recommendations related to employability were made more specific with a call for individual programme specifications focusing on the development of key skills of:

*'[...] communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn'*

(Dearing, 1997, p.372)

Post-Dearing in 1999, Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, indicated a shift in the way in which university performance would be measured in the future. Smith et al. (2000) highlighted the intention to use such metrics as a means by which investment in higher education can be linked to perceived performance. Furthermore, greater access to destinations data offers the potential for students to have more insight into possible career paths upon graduation.

This period saw the focus on the need for universities to support students in the development of ‘generic skills/attributes’, ‘core/transferable skills’, ‘graduate attributes’. Harvey et al. (1997) noted that as well as developing subject-specific knowledge, universities have an obligation to support students in the development of particular attributes that will allow them to participate successfully in the workplace. Bath et al (2004) offered the following overview of key qualities:

*‘[...] critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, problem-solving, logical and independent thought, communication and information management skills, intellectual rigour, creativity and imagination, ethical practice, integrity and tolerance.’*

(Bath et al., 2004, p.313-314)

Although the various synonyms tend to be interchangeable, the perceived lack of theoretical underpinning to support the doctrine of employability ensures that this remains a controversial aspect of higher education:

*'[...] the term core skills is but one of several related terms, each of which has been used to label sets of skills or attributes deemed important by employers and government. These sets contain different numbers and combinations of skills, and are based on differing purposes, definitions and interpretations. What they have in common is that they are theoretically threadbare, and have rarely contained the perceptions of those staff who are expected to deliver these skills in higher education.'*

(Bennett et al., 1999, p.76)

Candy (2000) highlighted three agents for this change in emphasis within the higher education sector: governments, employers and students/graduates.

In a highly competitive environment, the onus is on the individual student to enhance their potential in the jobs market, not only whilst at university but throughout their career as 'lifelong learners' (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

Any unemployment can be perceived as a problem for the individual to resolve.

Conversely, in the knowledge economy, evidence of skills gained is the route to better jobs and higher pay (Brown, 2003).

Changes to the way in which higher education is funded from direct funding via grants to fees and student loans, has placed the emphasis on the student as a

customer of higher education which has in turn put universities under ever more scrutiny:

*'The central legitimating idea of higher education in Britain is changing. Increasingly, it is being viewed as sub-system of the economy.*

*[...]*

*There is a more explicit concern with universities producing new workers and the values of the consumer society are now embedded in educational relationships.'*

(Morley, 2001, p.131)

Boden and Nedeva (2010) contended that presenting degree courses as products to be consumed as a means of achieving competitive advantage in the jobs market, feeds into concerns that higher education is becoming commodified.

In 2015 the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) confirmed that university students now have consumer rights protection under UK law (Arora, 2015). As such, universities must be transparent in their course offerings including aspects such as location of study, fees and course structure. The application of these rights also has implications for the ways in which universities can amend a course once students have commenced their studies. The CMA highlight the responsibility that this change places on universities, ensuring confidence in standards and the reputation of the higher education

sector in the UK (Arora, 2015).

With the shift towards courses becoming products to be consumed, university courses are under more scrutiny than ever through ease of access to performance indicators such as Unistats and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data. Coate et al. cited in Morley (2001) noted that such surveillance is not necessarily acceptable to academics in the UK. The transparency of such data facilitates ease of comparison but such performance indicators can be highly subjective:

*'They reflect panics, prejudices and fears at any one particular political and historic moment but they carry no reliable analysis of the causes of the anxieties.'*

(Morley, 2001, p.131)

The rise of the student as consumer has evolved in parallel to the perceived change in emphasis towards universities being obliged to enhance graduate employability. The extent to which universities should be responsible for preparing students' transition into graduate employment brings to the fore contrasting philosophical perspectives as to the purpose of higher education. Barrie and Prosser (2004) argued that whilst academics might be generally supportive of facilitating the enhancement of generic attributes for their students, this shift does raise philosophical concerns as to the purpose of a university education. Holmes was more forthright:

*'After all, universities are not surrogate employment and training agencies'*

(Holmes, 1995, p.21)

Bennett et al. (1999) contended that there is a dichotomy between the culture and ideology of higher education based on academic rigour and the perspectives of employers' which may be perceived as rooted in operationalism.

Harvey (2000) argued that there is increasing polarity between the traditional view of higher education as focused on the subject discipline and the purpose of a university education as a mass producer of individuals ready to contribute to the economy. Harvey contended that the instrumentalism related to employability is evident in attempts by universities to predict and respond to skills gaps and the continued focus on the achievement of course-aligned graduate destinations.

McMurtry (1991) highlighted that those who reject the employability agenda refute the argument that higher education should place a priority on serving the needs of the economy and the profitability of employers. Furthermore:

*'[...] there are fundamental contradictions between the market and education models in terms of (1) Goals, (2) Motivations, (3) Methods and (4) Standards of Excellence.'*

(McMurtry, 1991, p.209)

Harvey (2000) argued that rather than ‘dumbing down’; changes in higher education are placing greater intellectual demands on students as they prepare for a highly dynamic workplace environment:

*‘The primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while simultaneously empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners.’*

(Harvey, 2000, p.3)

Teichler (2014) suggested a pragmatic approach to balancing the needs of academia and the employability agenda. Rather than universities being beholden to the perceived requirements of commerce, a focus on ‘professional relevance’ offers the potential for a more balanced approach which explores issues related to graduate life without being overly prescriptive. Collini (2011) also advocated protecting academic freedom in the face of change. In order to facilitate the creation of new knowledge universities should not be constrained to a focus on seeking solutions to current practical problems.

Notwithstanding such arguments, the ‘skills agenda’ has continued to evolve, sustained in part by the growth in numbers of those undertaking undergraduate degrees. In the early 1960s, 6% of young people in the UK attended university (DfES, 2003). The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) has been available since 2004; in 2011/12 participation levels reached a record HEIPR of 49% (BIS, 2015b). The ‘massification’ of higher



education and related changes to the way in which universities are funded from state-subsidised free higher education to fees and student loans has brought seismic changes across the higher education sector and has led to concerns that the very purpose of universities is being compromised:

*'This has caused concerns about the reductive definition of the purpose of higher education. Has utilitarianism eclipsed intellectualism in UK universities? Do universities exist simply to meet the needs of modern capitalism and are students being constructed solely as future workers, rather than fully rounded citizens?'*

(Morley, 2010, p.132)

Graduates have always entered an uncertain world but Barnett (2004) argued that graduating millennials are entering a particularly dynamic and volatile jobs market and it has been argued that this calls for a foundation of core competencies in order to survive and thrive in a highly competitive environment.

In the face of such instability and revolutionary change, Barnett (2004) criticised a focus on the development of particular generic key skills as a panacea for the difficulties graduates will face on entering the workplace:

*'The university, in other words, should engage with the life-world challenges and, thereby, the pedagogical challenges, that arise from an age of supercomplexity.'*

(Barnett, 2004, p.250)

*'In short, we are confronted in this idea of education with the nonsense belief that we can generate human beings for uncertainty through a new kind of certainty in the curriculum.'*

(ibid. p.256)

Employability has been perceived as a remedy when there are many other variables that create inequalities in terms of career prospects for graduates. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) argued that rather than a meritocracy based on graduates' skills and personal attributes inequalities persist:

*'[...] social class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability and university attended all impact on the opportunities available. It is argued that the discourse of employability, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and neglect of social inequalities, has potentially damaging consequences for these graduates.'*

(Moreau and Leathwood,  
2006, p.305)

As Hesketh (2003) noted, there is a danger that in focusing an individual's potential employability wider social inequalities are disregarded. Morley (2001) has suggested developing the concept of 'employer-ability' to:

*'[...] balance out the power relations embedded in the employability discourse [...]'*

(Morley, 2001, p.137)

This concept could serve to sensitise employers to issues of gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation and disability.

In their report of 2003 for HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England), Mason et al. found that in terms of enhancing employability, whilst there was general agreement as to the benefits of work experience and placements, there is little evidence that the teaching of generic employability skills within courses has a positive impact on initial graduate performance in the jobs market and subsequent career development.

## **2.4 Concepts of Employability**

Employability is a contentious issue and there is no single definitive definition in the context of higher education. The vagaries around the concept of employability have undermined various attempts to apply academic underpinning to evolving theories:

*'It is one of the few words that has gone from cliché to jargon without the intermediate stage of meaning.'*

(Rajan, 2000, p.23)

Atkins (1999) underlined the lack of clarity around the term:

*'[...] the field remains confused as to nomenclature ('enterprise', 'core', 'key', 'common', 'transferable', 'generic') and classification of types of skill (e.g. personal attributes, process skills, technical competencies). Not surprisingly, Dunne (1997) makes the point that 'transferable skills' meets Adorno's criterion of an unfulfilled concept, i.e. one which is not sufficiently coherent in the abstract to be fully realisable in practice.'*

(Atkins, 1999 p.268)

Atkins' concerns are reflected in the following quote from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES):

*'The burning need is not to define employability skills, but to help people acquire them.'*

(UKCES, 2009, p.11)

An early model for career planning and employability was put forward by Law and Watts (1977). The 'DOTS' model (Decision learning, Opportunity-

awareness, Transition skills and Self-awareness) can be seen as a starting point for the evolution of more sophisticated frameworks.

In the late 1990s, in some contexts notions of employability were considered in terms of securing and retaining employment (Harvey, 2001). This approach was perceived as overly simplistic however. Taking a more learner-centred approach, Harvey (2003) suggested a more holistic method with the emphasis on enhancing particular traits such as critical analysis and reflective practice, rather than developing specific attributes that will enable a graduate to secure employment.

Variations on this theme allude to employability being about developing attributes within individuals that will make them better placed to sustain and progress throughout a career (Allison et al., 2002); employability is often synonymous with lifelong learning. Rather than employability being about securing a graduate post, the emphasis is on highlighting to students the importance of ongoing personal development in order to succeed in a fast-evolving workplace environment.

The definition of employability as adopted by the UK's Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) in 2005 has been widely accepted. The USEM model was developed in response to criticisms over the perceived lack of academic underpinning for previous attempts at defining employability and consists of the following inter-related aspects:

*'Understanding;*

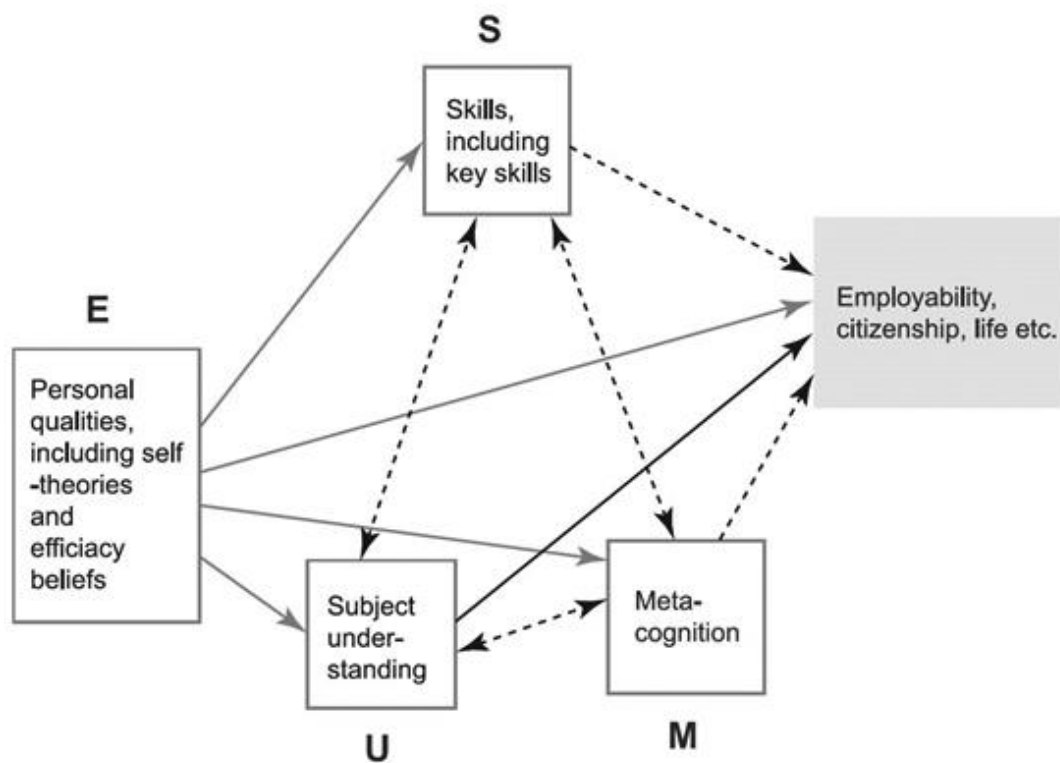
*Skilful practices in context (deliberately so labelled in order to avoid the undesirable connotations of 'skills', and to acknowledge the situatedness of practice and performance);*

*(self-) Efficacy and personal qualities; and*

*Metacognition.'*

(Yorke, 2010, p.5)

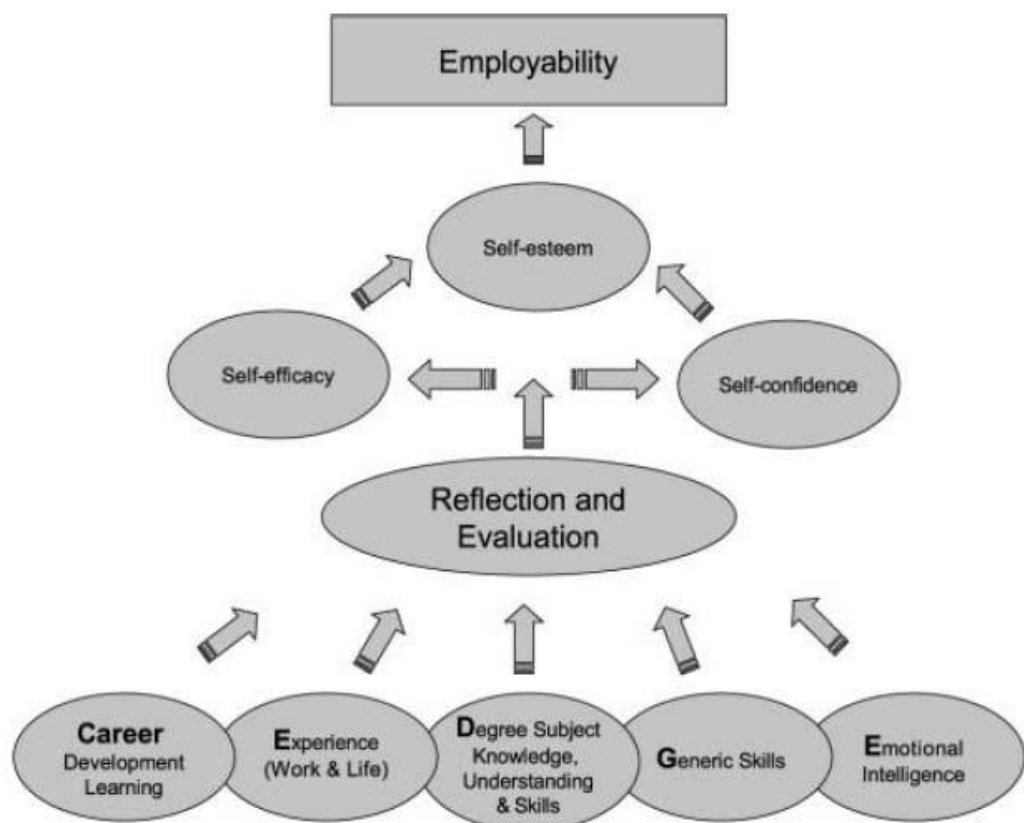
**Figure 1: The USEM Model of Employability (Knight and Yorke, 2006, p.5)**



Whilst widely adopted, the USEM model (see Figure 1) was perceived as relatively opaque to non-academic audiences (Pool and Sewell, 2007). In order to address this issue Pool and Sewell (2007) developed the careerEDGE model as a tool that could be easily understood by all stakeholders including students

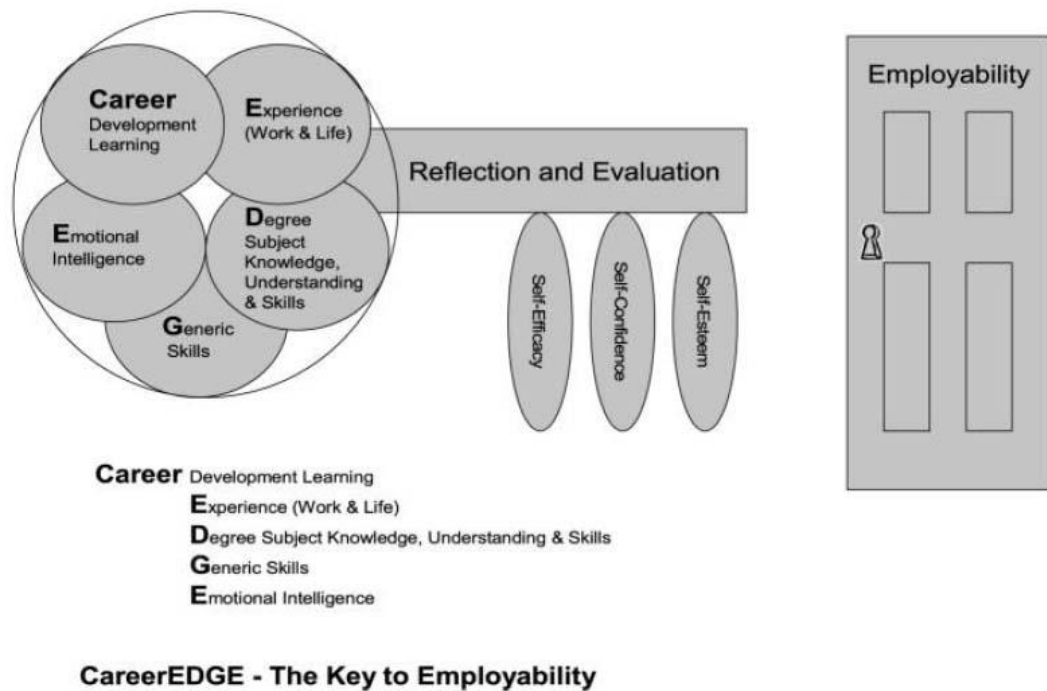
and their parents. Incorporating the notion of satisfaction with one's career they developed the 'Essential Components of Employability' model (see Figure 2). The intention was to create a theoretical and practical framework for employability offering the potential to enhance approaches to assessment and support investigation into the validity of employability-related initiatives.

**Figure 2: The Essential Components of Employability (Pool and Sewell, 2007, p.280)**



The Metaphorical Model of Employability diagram (Figure 3) was developed as a practical tool for helping to explain the concept.

**Figure 3: A Metaphorical Model of Employability (Pool and Sewell, 2007, p.281)**



In its Working Towards the Future report (2011), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) refined the ESECT definition of employability and underlined the importance of graduates having a positive attitude and focused on:

- self-management;
- team-working;
- business and customer awareness;
- problem solving;
- communication;
- application of numeracy;
- application of information technology.



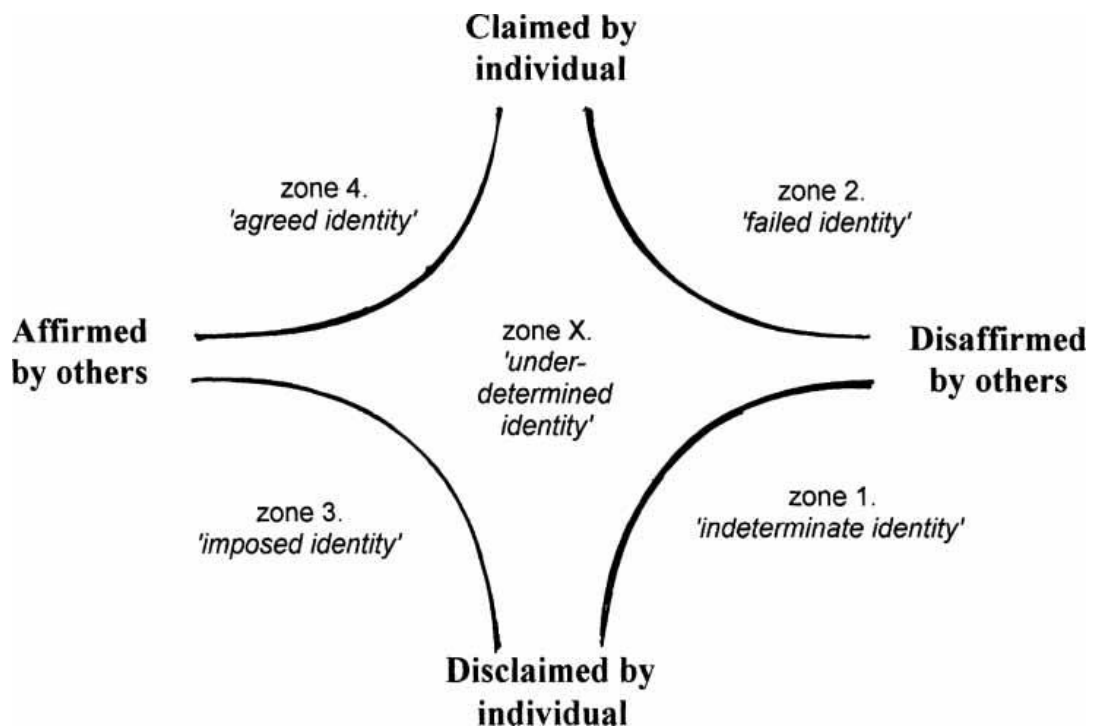
Whilst these refinements by the CBI are subtle, researchers have emphasised that the culture within higher education is different to the commercial world with each having its own notions of excellence that do not easily translate (McMurty, cited in Atkins 1999). Furthermore, Holmes (2001) contended that:

*'The skills agenda provides little help in understanding the complexity of post-graduation career trajectories, for it assumes that the process of gaining a job is simply a matter of matching skills required and skills possessed.'*

(Holmes, 2001, p.112)

Holmes (2001) proposed that concepts of employability should emphasise supporting the development of context-specific individual graduate identities. Such identities are socially constructed and borne out of negotiation (Holmes, 2011). There may be intermediate stages in the emergence of such identities and the Claim-Affirmation Model of Modalities of Emergent Identity (see Figure 4) allows for the mapping of evolving identities, for instance in the transition from higher education into graduate employment.

Figure 4: Claim-Affirmation Model of Modalities of Emergent Identity (Holmes, 2011, p.13)



## 2.5 Prominence of Graduate Employability

Various socio-economic factors have contributed to the expansion of higher education from an elite to mass system. Bathmaker (2003) offered an overview of the drivers behind the huge expansion of university student numbers in the UK in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rapid social and technological change and in particular, the decline of mass production manufacturing in the West, has seen the rise of the concept of the knowledge economy; countries investing heavily in the education of their young people as a means of securing prosperity in an uncertain globalised world.

Trow (1973) proposed the following classification of higher education: a system can be said to be elite when less than 15% of the eligible population participate; 15-40% indicates a mass system and when figures reach more than 40% a universal system has been established. Bathmaker (2003) contended that by the start of the 1990s the concept of a mass system of higher education in the UK in the 21st century was accepted across the political spectrum. Although seen as a vehicle for social mobility, the huge investment required to sustain the expansion of higher education led to politically controversial changes to the funding structure.

As the provision of higher education expanded, so the notion of graduate employability rose in prominence. Boden and Nedeva (2010) offered the following encapsulation of the shifting emphasis towards employability across higher education:

*'Traditionally, universities regarded graduate employment as an aspect of institutions' relationship with the labour market, and one where they enjoyed a significant degree of discretion. Now, employability is a performative function of universities, shaped and directed by the state, which is seeking to supplant labour markets.'*

(Boden and Nedeva, 2010,  
p.37)

The expansion of student numbers from 50,000 in the 1960s to over 1.7 million by 1996 was led by student demand for courses in the humanities and social sciences (Brennan and Little, 1997) and notions of graduate employability were not paramount initially:

*'To some extent, links with employment were largely ignored by the professors and lecturers who taught the students in these predominantly non-vocational course programmes. They assumed, with some justification, that both the students and their teachers were there principally because of an intrinsic interest in the subject and that securing suitable employment would be neither a problem for the former nor a responsibility of the latter. Thus, the cultural assumptions of the smaller elite system were transferred into the beginnings of a mass system.'*

(Brennan and Little, 1997,  
p.532)

Wagner (1995) noted that as the sector expanded and costs grew universities also had to adapt to greater scrutiny:

*'The creation of the Department of Education and Science and the transfer of responsibility from the Treasury in 1964 marked the end of the hands-off approach to university finance. The era of pushing a cheque through the letter-box and walking away was over.'*

(Wagner, 1995, p.16)

Alongside the expansion of higher education provision and market competition, McMurtry (1991) highlighted the relative fall in government investment in this area of education since the late 1970s. Pre-massification, justifications for investment in higher education emphasised the educational benefits of the elite system. As costs grew in line with the growth in student numbers, the momentum of the employability agenda increased as underfunded universities sought to justify the need for continued investment by emphasising the underlining importance of the higher education sector to national economic prosperity.

Brennan and Little (1997) also explored drivers for change that led to the rise of the employability agenda; concerns over graduate unemployment and the onus on newer universities to develop distinctive offerings based on new vocational courses. Although perhaps not as obviously focused on aligning courses to particular careers (aside from areas such as medicine) traditional universities also began the process of enhancing the development of transferable skills. Across the higher education sector, universities explored ways to adapt to the ramifications and opportunities presented by mass higher education.

Brennan and Little (1997) also considered the responses of employers to the evolution of higher education. They noted that feedback from employers was channelled through agencies such as the CBI, the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR).

Criticisms tended towards the generic, focusing on the importance of graduates possessing fundamental skills of numeracy and literacy and supporting the inclusion of opportunities for work experience within degree programmes.

Generally, employers have encouraged universities to focus more on enhancing graduate employability but although this tends to be more of a focus at the newer universities, employers tend to be conservative in their interpretation of the different types of higher education institutions and were found to favour graduates from old universities (Brennan and Little, 1997).

The government sponsored Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative was a catalyst for change with regard to curriculum transformation. Developed in collaboration with industrial partners with a remit of enhancing graduate employability, the scheme was launched in 1987 (Binks, 1996).

Although seen as a catalyst for change, Brennan and Little (1997) raised concerns over the lack of evaluation of the effectiveness of the scheme in relation to the enhancement of graduate preparedness for the workplace and in terms of gathering feedback from students.

In 1985 a national system of quality assurance was introduced in higher education in the UK in order to facilitate a greater connection between higher education and the graduate labour market (Dill, 2007). This mandatory system focused on the needs of the students including their prospects for graduate

employment. Aktins (1999) noted that the impact of this scheme has been manifest with:

*'[...] employment-related skills appearing in student handbooks, course documentation, module descriptors, and built into records of achievement or transcripts. Programme approval, validation and review processes routinely require evidence that students will have the opportunity to acquire, develop and practise employment-related skills. Separate accreditation is available in some HEIs either through their own certification, through NVQ units or through City and Guilds Senior Awards schemes.'*

(Atkins, 1999, p.268)

Atkins (1999) highlighted that from the late 1980s through to the late 1990s there have been various reports and papers, seeking to influence universities to focus on the enhancement of skills related to employability. Various schemes and initiatives have been borne out of the attention placed on this area:

*'[...] it is likely that most HEIs will be involved in some or all of the following:*

- *discipline networks;*
- *work-based-learning programmes;*
- *projects on transferable skills;*
- *work placement schemes;*

- *projects aimed at helping unemployed graduates enter the labour market;*
- *demand and supply side projects for graduates in small and medium size businesses (SMEs);*
- *the Shell STEP programme;*
- *teaching company schemes;*
- *integrated graduate development schemes;*
- *alumni projects.*
- *In addition, there may well be in-house funding of curriculum and staff development initiatives around the employability theme, and changes to the work of the internal careers service.'*

(Atkins, 1999, p.267-8)

The notion of 'capability' was also developed around this time:

*'Capability is an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively - not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstances.'*

(Stephenson, 1992 p.2)

Perhaps in part due to the political climate at the time, the notion of capability was not universally accepted. Although the model was not alien to academia there was a lack of supporting theory and empirical evidence to underpin the concept. In the political context of the time when Prime Minister Margaret



Thatcher was seen to be taking a lead from the world of business rather than the professions, notions of capability tended to be dismissed by academics as another employers' wish list (Yorke, 2010). The need for academic 'buy-in' for the acceptance of initiatives such as this is highlighted by Brennan and Little:

*'[...] although external initiatives may have an important role to play in stimulating change in higher education, it is the academic community itself which determines the pace and direction of change.'*

(Brennan and Little, 1997,  
p.531)

The Dearing Report, (1997) emphasised the importance of enhancing skills related to employability as part of *all* degree programmes. In this way the report sought to underpin all degrees with a foundation of employability based on transferable skills.

Tomlinson (1997) acknowledged the impact of the Dearing Report and in particular the focus on:

*'[...] enhancing the overall functional and economic value and output of universities. In part, this has reflected a wider agenda to make HEIs more publicly accountable and transparent.'*

(Tomlinson, 2010, p.6)

Cranmer (2006) went further stating that the Dearing Report:

*'[...] brought the debate to a close, in policy terms at least, by concluding that the development of key skills should become a central aim of higher education.'*

(Cranmer, 2006, p.169)

The emphasis on accountability saw the creation of new agencies such as Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), which had graduate employability as one of its priorities (HEFCE, 2002).

The Lambert Review (2003) elaborated on the notion of accountability, encouraging greater transparency in the comparative outcomes of individual courses in terms of graduate destinations:

*'Employability data are only published at university level rather than on a departmental basis, and do not contain information about jobs or salaries. This is not particularly helpful for prospective students. They would benefit from much clearer market signals, which would include a better picture of where the graduates from a particular course find work, and how much they earn.'*

(Lambert, 2003, p.107)

The report also made recommendations to ensure that government priorities in this area are followed through. Emphasis was placed on the role of Sector Skills Councils as a conduit by which the requirements of employers are addressed within universities (Lambert, 2003). Sector Skills Councils were established in 2001 as a means by which the skills requirements of employers could be identified. Any skills gaps at graduate and postgraduate level could be addressed in consultation with HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). Alongside such formal influences, the Lambert Review also emphasised the importance of informal interactions between business and higher education.

Evidence of the way in which employability has become a more explicit outcome of a university education can be seen in the requirements for the enhancement of skills relating to employability within course accreditation. In 2007, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) an, 'independent body entrusted with monitoring, and advising on, standards and quality in UK higher education. ' (QAA, n.d.) published subject benchmark statements, making:

*'[...] reference to the expectation that graduates will develop employability skills through their programme of study. This, together with the requirements of professional bodies, has meant that most course curricula are now expected to address student employability, and to evidence this at validation.'*

(Pegg et al., 2012, p.30)

The CBI (2009) highlighted the need for greater consistency and the sharing of best practice with regard to enhancing employability. They recommended that each institution should undertake a review as to how they are currently addressing graduate employability and how this might be enhanced.

There remain issues around bringing together the cultures of academia and employers. Lowden et al. (2011) noted that whilst there are examples of good practice of employers and universities working together to enhance graduate employability:

*'[...] there are still issues and barriers between employers and many of those responsible for policy in HEIs, particularly in terms of differences in mindset, expectations and priorities concerning employability.'*

(Lowden et al., 2011, p.vi)

Employability continues to be an important theme for the QAA. The QAA's Higher Education Review: Themes for 2015-16 (2014) alluded to student employability being a key issue in education and more widely politically. Such emphasis is driven by the general economic climate and increased student expectations borne out of higher fees. Greater focus in this area can be seen in the development of various initiatives within HEIs such as employability-oriented award schemes and the growth of employability-related extracurricular activities including the promotion of students' entrepreneurial

skills. The report went on to highlight issues around consistency with regard to initiatives related to employability:

*‘These include the impact of technology, demography, the environment, globalisation, societal changes and social mobility, student and societal expectations and student engagement with student employability initiatives.’*

(QAA, 2014a, p.2)

Evidence of the importance placed on employability and the continued focus on the pursuance of credible initiatives for improvement can be seen in the fact that student employability was also a theme in the Higher Education Reviews of 2013-14 (QAAb, 2014) and 2014-15 (QAA, 2015).

As part of the trend towards universities becoming more explicit in communicating their approach to enhancing graduate employability, institutions have developed their own schemes and systems for rewarding the added value that such extra-curricular activities and achievements can offer to the student. The Burgess Report (Universities UK, 2007) proposed a nationally recognised scheme, the HEAR, the aim of which is to:

*‘capture a blend of knowledge, skills and experience acquired through a wide range of higher education experiences;*

- *measure, record and provide students with a much broader picture of their achievements than now;*
- *ensure that employers have better information about the distinguishing qualities of different graduates;*
- *fit into and promote a culture of lifelong learning by appearing to be less of an abrupt 'end point'; and*
- *be practical to implement, useful and used.'*

(Universities UK, 2007 p.34)

Pegg et al. (2012) noted the shift in emphasis placed on employability:

*'Sector-wide initiatives, such as the introduction of employability statements and the HEAR, form part of the formalisation and endorsement of employability development as a core aspect of the HE undergraduate offer, articulated at the level of the institution.'*

(Pegg et al., 2012 p.12)

Since 2009, universities have been obliged by government to publish employability statements that reflect the approach taken by their particular institution to support students in the development of skills seen to enhance graduate employability. Government intervention in this area is intended to use market forces as a driver for improved delivery (BIS, 2009). Universities are obliged to consider and articulate their approach with the purpose that potential applicants can more easily compare methods for the enhancement of

graduate employability as one of the key differentiators to consider when applying to university (UKCES, 2010a).

University employability statements are now ubiquitous. HEFCE's (2011a) review of such statements found that in terms of presenting a coherent message the quality of such documents was variable. The language of the statements would seem to imply that they were created for an internal university audience; the jargon used could be seen as off-putting to a potential applicant. Not only do such statements not differentiate between disciplines or courses (Bath et al., 2004), they lack detailed insight into an institution's particular approach which was the intention of the directive (HEFCE, 2011a):

*'There is little information about how employability is embedded within the curriculum. Employer involvement too is variable, although many HEIs do indicate they have strong links with employers.'*

- *There are tensions inherent within the messages. Some statements appear to be written to provide a competitive edge, while others appear to have been written merely in response to the HEFCE requirement and the audience is not given full consideration.'*

(HEFCE, 2011a, p.2)

Furthermore, Archer and Davison (2008) contend that the messages being promoted by universities do not necessarily reflect the requirements of industry.

The continued emphasis on accountability is reflected in Enterprise for All (Young, 2014) with a recommendation that universities should be obliged to publish the destinations data, including earnings, of their graduates for a decade after graduation.

Cultural differences, variances in interpretations of employability and a lack of conclusive evidence to prove the validity of various initiatives has meant that graduate employability is still a contested area even in the face of ever-greater accountability and scrutiny of processes to ensure its enhancement.

## **2.6 What Attributes do Employers Want From Graduates?**

There have been various studies seeking to gather evidence from employers as to what they are looking for from graduates; whilst themes emerge there is no consensus in the literature. Differences can be seen within organisations as well as between them (Harvey, 2003). There are issues around misconceptions:

*'Often, those who are most critical of graduates, those who operate in the public forum, are highly placed in the organisation and have the least contact with new recruits.'*

(Harvey, 2003, p.5)

Requirements vary, in part reflecting the particular culture within the organisation (UKCES, 2009). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) contended that a reason



for the lack of clarity from employers is explained by the realities of graduate recruitment whereby employers make assumptions of performance based on predicted potential:

*'They need some kind of basis for conceiving this potential, and this basis is provided through the idea of graduate identity, suitably refracted and diffused in the light of their own requirements and experience of graduate recruits.'*

(Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011,  
p.565)

Various reports have offered distillations of employer requirements from graduates. Typically employers express that they need graduates that can demonstrate:

*'[...] high-level skills, knowledge and appropriate personal attributes, and who can 'grow' the job or help transform the organisation. [...] Employers' 'wish lists' abound, as do lists of (variously-described) generic, transferable, intellectual, cognitive, graduate, key, practical and interpersonal skills.'*

(HEA, 2006, p.3)

However, Teichler (1998) highlighted the need for caution when interpreting the stated requirements of employers as:

*'[...] employers' expectations regarding the education system are often inconsistent with their recruitment and personnel policies.'*

(Teichler, 1998)

Various research studies (Wilson, 2012; Mason et al., 2003; Harvey, 2003) suggested that alongside job-specific skills, employers are typically looking for evidence of the following when recruiting graduates:

- team working;
- problem solving;
- self-management;
- literacy and numeracy;
- ICT skills;
- good interpersonal and communication skills.

Lowden et al (2011) also included:

- 'knowledge of the business;
- initiative but also able to follow instruction;
- leadership.

Along with evidence of *'motivation, tenacity, and commitment'*.

(Lowden et al., 2011, p.12).

Harvey (2003) cited the importance of an appreciation of the culture of the workplace and a level of commercial awareness. Harvey also noted that employers seek graduates that can help their organisation to cope with ongoing change. As such, they are looking for graduates that can demonstrate problem solving skills, can offer critical and reflective insight, have a flexible approach, are not adverse to risk and are keen to enhance their continued learning.

Branine (2008) noted that employers require graduates:

*'[...] who are motivated, flexible, pragmatic, dynamic, responsible, intellectually aggressive and able to work both independently and in a team.'*

(Branine, 2008, p.510)

In presenting the '*adaptive-adaptable-transformative continuum*' Harvey (2003, p.11) explored the relationship between graduates establishing themselves within a particular organisation and the potential for them to add value:

*'Organisations are unlikely to expect graduate-level employees either to merely 'fit in' or, conversely, to be constantly 'transforming'. Tacit knowledge is important in being effective at moving along the employability continuum, from adaptation to successfully shaping one's environment.'*

(Harvey, 2003, p.11)

It is not enough to be able to cope with change; graduates are expected to be able to exploit the potential that ongoing change can offer an organisation (Harvey, 2003). Harvey noted that employers do not necessarily want fully trained graduate recruits however:

*'They want intelligent, rounded people who have a depth of understanding, can apply themselves, take responsibility and develop their role in the organisation'.*

(Harvey, 2003, p.6)

Harvey (2003) contended that the size of the organisation does have an impact on the extent to which employers were prepared to wait to see a return on their investment with smaller organisations being more impatient for such evidence.

Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) found that employers were looking for particular personal traits on appointment including '*personal ethical qualities of honesty, integrity and trust*' (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.570) and a certain level of awareness of the culture of the particular workplace in order to work successfully alongside colleagues but many were prepared to be more patient in the support of the development of more specialist, job-specific skills:

*'[...] for many employers, less is expected regarding technical skills than the one thing that all graduates are presumably good at: the ability to present ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing. Indeed, the ability to*

*demonstrate cultural and social awareness, on appointment, comes ahead of IT skills.*

(Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011,  
p.570)

Typically, employers acknowledge an edge of advantage for those graduates who had undertaken work experience or placements alongside their studies as this prepares them for the culture of the workplace as well as enhancing learning (Harvey, 2003).

Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2009) found that employers were taking a sophisticated approach to the consideration of work experience; evidence of having undertaken work place activities was not enough in itself. Employers are keen for the graduates to be able to articulate how their experiences in the workplace had fed into their personal development.

In a later study, Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011), found experience of the workplace was in itself, not necessarily a priority. Crucially, employers were looking for evidence that such experience has contributed to good interpersonal skills and reflective practice.

Archer and Davison (2008) considered a range of data from employers and found they tended to be satisfied with IT skills and the credibility of the degree qualifications. However, whilst employers highlighted communication skills as

the most important they were ranked as 16<sup>th</sup> in terms of satisfaction. Employers concern over poor communication skills was echoed by Belt et al. (2010) who also cited issues over poor attitude and highlighted the importance of graduate recruits being able to communicate well with colleagues and clients.

## **2.7 The Role of the University in Enhancing Graduate Employability**

Employability statements are a ubiquitous feature on university websites; a catalyst for their proliferation was the HEFCE initiative in 2010 which invited all HEIs to publish a short employability statement to help prospective students in their decision-making process. HEFCE (2011a) subsequently published a report offering an evaluation of a sample of employability statements. The findings offer an insight into some of the issues around the role of universities in enhancing graduate employability: employability is not necessarily embedded throughout the curriculum; employer involvement is variable and the approach to the presentation of the statements suggests that the providers were fulfilling a requirement rather than embracing the spirit in which the initiative was intended.

One of the explanations for this is the lack of agreement amongst academics as to the role of the university in developing skills related to employability. Issues around graduate employability have been a focus for attention in the Australian higher education system for the last twenty years. Government concerns

around this issue have been a factor in Australia continuing to be one of the centres for research in this area. Kinash et al. (2015) noted that based on survey data from 2013, Graduate Careers Australia highlighted that graduate employability rates are the lowest they have been for the last two decades. Considering issues around enhancing graduate employability in Australian universities, Barrie (2004) underlined the impact of variances of opinion across academia. Different perspectives were evident not only across a range of disciplines but also within disciplines:

*'Importantly, the different conceptions identified position graduate attributes differently in terms of the nature and complexity of the skill or attribute and its relationship to discipline knowledge. This has implications for the ways that academics incorporate the teaching and learning of these attributes, claimed as outcomes in policy, in their teaching and curricula.'*

(Barrie, 2004, p.264)

Despite the drivers for universities to embrace employability, Bennett et al. (1999) underlined that some academics are sceptical that their role extends to enhancing skills related to employment. Drummond et al. (1998) noted that whilst universities may be obliged to outwardly express their adherence to the employability agenda, academics do not necessarily perceive its value:

*'Given such variations in academics' understanding of the concept of graduate attributes, it is not surprising that at an institutional and system*

*wide level, uptake and implementation of graduate attributes curriculum initiatives has been variable. While policy statements claiming such outcomes have proliferated, attempts to implement strategies to achieve such outcomes have been patchy'.*

(Barrie, 2006, p.234)

There is also the dichotomy between universities having to produce the 'finished article' and notions of life-long learning (Coopers and Lybrand, 1998). The employability agenda tends to overlook students' experience of the workplace either prior to or during their studies. Morley (2001) highlighted that the rhetoric around employability tends to imply that students do not have experience of the workplace. However, many mature and younger students, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, will have experience of employment.

Knight (2001) argued that general inequalities in the labour market should be considered when exploring graduate employability and employment. Morley (2001) argued that the focus on employability distracts from:

*'[...] how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities'*

(Morley, 2001, p.131)



Employers' perceptions of the relative merits of different types of universities persist (Cranmer, 2006). Coopers and Lybrand (1998) found that it was typically the 'new' universities that were most obviously focusing on graduate employability and yet employers preferred to recruit from the most prestigious universities that are typically less obviously focused on enhancing graduate employability.

## **2.8 Developing Skills Related to Employability in the Context of an Undergraduate Degree**

The Wilson Review (2012) was unequivocal regarding the responsibility being placed on universities to enhance graduate employability:

*'It is for universities to provide optimal opportunities for students to develop employability skills through the formal learning methodologies used within the university and to ensure that students are able to articulate the skills that they have developed through their learning experiences. It is also for universities to ensure that their staff have the appropriate skills to support students in this process.'*

(Wilson, 2012, p.32)

However, as Cranmer (2006) noted, attempts by universities to address employability are undermined by the complexity of the issues involved.

The key themes that emerge from the analysis of various studies that focus on how universities can adapt pedagogies to enhance graduate employability are: that the teaching of employability should be contextualised and embedded within the curriculum and that no single approach will suit the wide range of contrasting courses that are available across very different institutions.

Pegg et al. (2012) offered an overview of research and developments in this area and conclude that reports tend to focus on defining employability and that an ideal model for pedagogical delivery has yet to emerge. Harvey et al. (2002) categorised employability-enhancing activities within universities into four main areas:

- improved central services (typically careers services) to support students and graduates in their pursuance of work;
- adjustments to the curriculum to accommodate an embedded approach to the enhancement of attributes seen to be aligned to employability or to allow for input from employers;
- enhanced opportunities for work experience either within courses or via extracurricular activity;
- support for reflective practice related to the development of attributes aligned to employability.

The HEA (Higher Education Academy) contended that students are entitled to support from their university in the enhancement of their employability through:

- *'fostering a continuing willingness to learn;*
- *developing a range of employability-related capabilities and attributes;*  
*and*
- *promoting confidence in reflecting on and articulating these capabilities and attributes in a range of recruitment situations.'*

(HEA, 2006, p.9)

Knight and Yorke (2006) underlined the importance of exploring the particular professional context of a course when looking to develop a new curriculum model:

*'One size does not fit all institutions, as far as employability is concerned. Contexts, student recruitment patterns, envisaged labour markets and traditions are four variables that influence the embedding of employability in curricula. Further, major change designed to create an 'ideal' employability-oriented curriculum may prove to have prohibitive collateral costs.'*

(Knight and Yorke, 2006, p.14)

Overall, the research tends to suggest that a holistic approach should be taken to the development of strategies to enhance graduate employability. This all-inclusive approach extends to seeking further integration of careers services within universities (Bridgstock, 2009).

The Future Fit, Preparing Graduates for the World of Work report (2009) was developed as collaboration between the CBI and Universities UK. The report aimed to highlight good practice in terms of universities working in conjunction with employers for the enhancement of graduate employability. The report offered insight into the range of approaches being taken by universities. These include:

- the development of university employability strategies that describe how the institution defines employability and supports students in gaining the appropriate experience and skills;
- work-related learning;
- revising delivery and assessment to emphasise employability skills;
- providing compulsory (typically accredited) employability-oriented modules;
- providing optional employability-oriented modules that may be credit-bearing or part of an award scheme. Such schemes may be delivered by employers;
- presenting foundation degrees which involve work-based learning;

- using Personal Development Plans as a vehicle for reflection on the development of skills related to employability;
- enhancing opportunities for year-long or short term work placements;
- promoting and supporting entrepreneurship amongst students;
- sessions and volunteering opportunities supported by the careers service or the students' union that are intended to fill skills gaps.

UKCES (2009) highlighted the opportunities that universities can provide to enhance skills related to employability. In summary, the report contends that such skills can be enhanced by contextualised experiential action-learning whereby learners have the opportunity to explore the application of employability-related skills. Emphasis is also placed on opportunities for work experience either within a company or through classroom-based simulations. It is noted that learning related to employability should be integrated and reflected upon.

This approach was further refined by a UKCES report (2010a) which considered evidence from around 200 institutions in the development of six key principles to be considered by institutions looking to embed aspects of employability across their curriculums:

*'1. **Based on real workplace practice** – with real employer involvement, and people outside the learning environment.*

2. **Experiential** – *putting principles into practice, learning from mistakes and observation of self and peers.*
3. **Personal** – *with active engagement with learners, challenging inappropriate behaviour and supporting self-improvement.*
4. **Reflective** – *offering frequent opportunities to observe progress and challenges, and learn from them.*
5. **A structured and integrated process** – *personal development planning, advice and guidance, recorded.*
6. **Strong institutional leadership and resources** – *ideally through a whole institutional review.'*

(UKCES, 2010a, p.11)

The UKCES report (2010a) emphasised the need for subtle adjustments to the delivery of teaching, in particular the pedagogy needs to reflect an appreciation of how students learn skills related to employability and the capability to contextualise such learning within vocational courses.

Whilst various studies have considered how universities have sought to develop and implement strategies designed to enhance graduate employability UKCES (2009) contended that innovative practice is not sustainable without:

*'[...] a surrounding framework of policy, funding and assessment that empowers and encourages practitioners to make full use of it.'*

(UKCES, 2009, p.4)

In consideration of recommended pedagogy for the enhancement of employability the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2006) emphasised the importance of collaborative work, cognitive modelling and supporting the development of metacognition.

The HEA (2012) went on to consider some of the issues around fully engaging students with employability; in particular, the report highlights the need to consider socio-economic factors noting that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to partake:

*'[...] finance, mobility and family issues, peer pressure, lack of relevance of the opportunity, and lack of flexibility in length and timing remain barriers to students accessing work experience.*

*Limited opportunities and networks in some sectors create a challenge for HEIs in ensuring equality of access to these opportunities for all students and sourcing sufficient quality opportunities.'*

(HEA, 2012, p.3)

Personal Development Planning (PDP) was borne out of the Dearing Report (1997) which recommended that all higher education institutions should introduce a Higher Education Progress File, comprising of a record of achievement provided by the university and a process by which students can track, enhance and reflect upon their personal development.

PDP has continued to evolve as the employability agenda has grown in prominence. The HEA (2009) contended that PDP supports employability in terms of helping students to translate what they have learnt in a way that enhances their employability. Furthermore, portfolios of achievement gathered through PDP can be presented to potential employers. The particular skills involved in PDP, such as reflective practice, capturing activities and planning for future development feed into employability:

*'PDP can be a structured means of planning, recording and reflecting on incremental development, with the 'employability' agenda contributing a context and a focus in terms of employment, as well as enhancing generic, transferable skills for lifelong learning.'*

(QAA Scotland, 2011, p.60)

Generally, skills related to employability have been perceived as being delivered via stand-alone modules or embedded across the curriculum. Cranmer (2006) argued that the two approaches can be seen as being extremes of a spectrum. By completely embedding employability, students may be unaware that such skills are being enhanced. Conversely, a module that is entirely focused on employability and lacking in contextualisation may suffer from student disengagement. Cranmer stated that the development of a range of initiatives within higher education means that the picture has become less polarised (see Table 1).



**Table 1: Expanded Model of Methods of Delivering Employability Skills in the Higher Education Curriculum (Cranmer, 2006, p.172)**

Delivered by subject lecturers (mandatory)				Delivered by Careers and Employability Unit personnel (optional)	
Total embedding of employability skills	Explicit embedding and integration	Bolt-on 'Professional Skills'	Bolt-on 'Generic Skills'	Parallel development Study Skills	Parallel development Generic Skills
Employability skills	Employability skills	Specific modules aimed at enhancing study and generic skills	Specific modules aimed at enhancing generic skills, developed by Careers and Employability Unit personnel, integrated into mainstream	Developing writing Creative thinking Using web resources	CV writing Career guidance Making effective job applications
Lose skills without trace Skills disappear in context No explicit assessment Low impact on curriculum	Visible skills Skills in context Explicit assessment High impact on curriculum	Visible skills (Study and generic skills) in context Explicit assessment High impact on curriculum	Visible skills (Generic) skills in context Explicit assessment High impact on curriculum	Bolt-on development Limited contextualisation Separate assessment Low impact on curriculum	Bolt-on development Limited contextualisation Separate assessment Low impact on curriculum

UKCES (2009) noted that there is no clear consensus as to whether an embedded approach is more effective than discrete modules:

*'Discrete delivery preserves the integrity of the employability skills teaching, puts it in the hands of teachers specially skilled in delivering it, and ensures it does not get lost in the curriculum. Embedding makes for parity of esteem between employability and specific technical skills, prevents employability skills being reduced to artificial exercises, and ensures its relevance.'*

(UKCES, 2009, p.54)

HEFCE's report of 2011 illustrated the continued steer from Government, employers and HEIs towards an embedded approach:

*'This will bring significant private and public benefit, demonstrating higher education's broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development.'*

(HEFCE, 2011b, p.4)

The HEA (2015) was unequivocal in its support of an embedded approach, arguing that all stakeholders including academics, support staff, careers services, student unions, students and employers should be participating in this process. Lees (2002) noted that the adoption of an embedded approach may require adjustments to teaching methods but the benefit of this strategy is that employability is integrated into the curriculum.

Consideration of research in this area would suggest that there is some debate around whether skills related to employability can be or should be assessed:

*'Curriculum goals should be assessed because that which is assessed gets taken seriously. That which isn't, doesn't.'*

(Yorke and Knight, 2004, p.2)

However, Yorke and Knight (2004) highlighted key issues around assessing such complex accomplishments which may only credibly be assessed on a

pass/fail basis. They argued that innovative approaches need to be considered when designing assessments, perhaps incorporating portfolios, self- and peer-assessment, which may involve a considerable overhead.

UKCES (2010a) also highlighted issues around measuring skills related to employability:

*'Ideally, employability skills are best delivered and assessed as in the context of broader vocational programmes. For the fundamental skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT assessment is relatively straightforward in the sense that teachers and trainers are comfortable with the objective methods commonly used to test those skills. However, personal employability skills, particularly attitudes and behaviours, are developmental in nature and are not as easily measured against a defined level of competence. In addition, these skills call for more flexible and tutor-driven approaches to assessment and many practitioners seemed less confident about using these approaches.'*

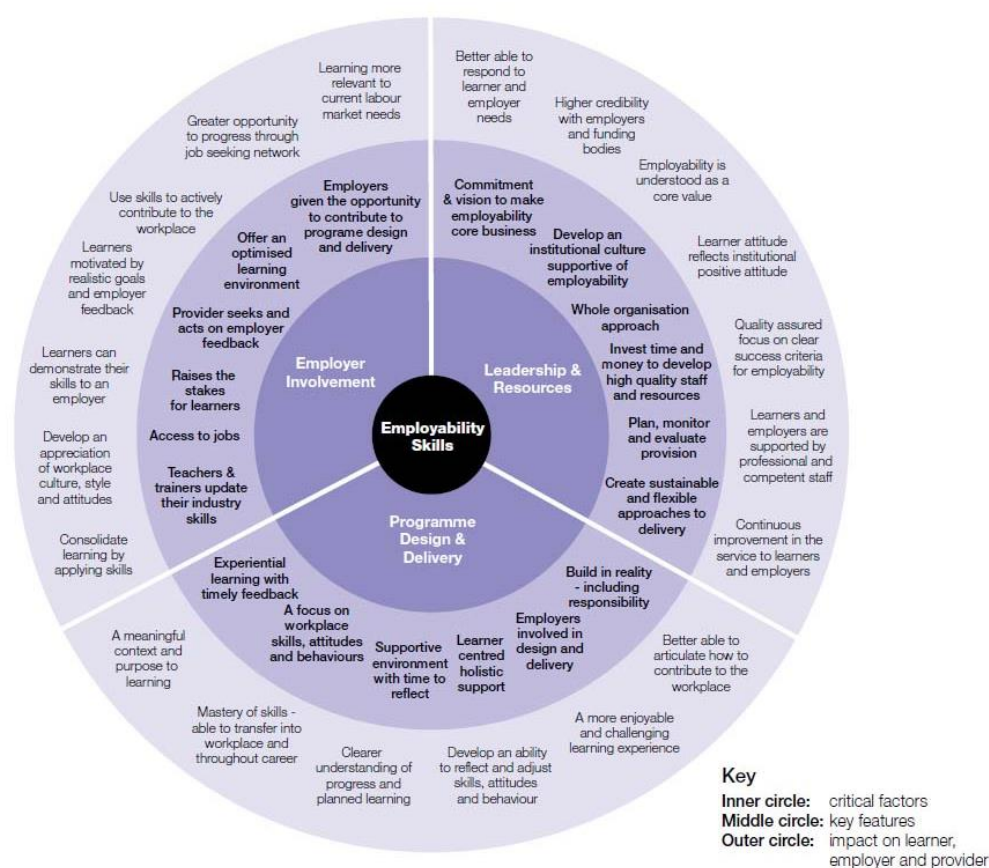
(UKCES, 2010a, p.5)

However, even with compulsory modules and a supporting framework of assessment, developing skills that employers require is not assured if individuals are not engaged (Diamond et al., 2011).

Cole, and Tibby (2013) noted that models can be beneficial for HEIs to use when developing their own approaches for the enhancement of graduate employability. Models can be helpful when articulating a particular approach that is being adopted to stakeholders such as academic staff and students. A model can also be a useful tool for reflecting upon current practice and can act as a measure by which current approaches can be appraised and enhanced. Models should also be flexible enough to be adapted to suit the particular requirements of a programme of study.

Various auditing tools and frameworks have been developed to support universities as they consider their own practices in light of a general move towards more overt strategies to enhance graduate employability. One such framework was published in 2009 by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and offered some practical approaches for institutions to consider. The report was borne out of research into existing practices related to the enhancement of employability within universities, colleges, schools and employment training providers. The report encourages a holistic approach, encapsulated in the 'employability wheel' (see Figure 5). The model is intended as a catalyst for audits and initiatives within institutions.

**Figure 5: Employability Wheel (UKCES, 2009, p.17)**



In 2015, the HEA published a more refined model (Figure 6) with the intention of this being a tool that universities could use as they work through improvements to their approaches to enhancing graduate employability. It is indicative of the issues that persist around defining employability that such a process within an organisation should start with an exploration of interpretations of what is meant by employability:

*'Defining employability including all key stakeholders and making this explicit at an institutional and at a programme level and with all your students.'*

(HEA, 2015, p.3)

The second stage involves auditing and mapping followed by prioritising actions. Finally, the impact of the initiatives should be measured. The cyclical nature of the model indicates that this is an evolving, collaborative process.

**Figure 6: Framework for Embedding Employability in Higher Education (HEA, 2015, p.3)**



Whilst conclusive evidence to support the impact of efforts to enhance graduate employability via changes to learning and teaching within courses remains elusive, various studies cite the benefits that students can gain from seizing opportunities to gain work experience and placements. For instance, Hall et al. (cited in Lowden et al., 2011) highlighted the potential for enhancing employability through personal development in a dynamic teamwork

environment. Their findings indicate that not only are placements beneficial to students in the short term they have continued value to graduates.

However, although there is much evidence to support the benefits of work experience and placements, Mason et al. (2006) highlighted the lack of evidence to support the benefits of teaching aspects of employability as part of the curriculum.

## **2.9 Initiatives Designed to Measure, Recognise and / or Enhance Graduate Employability**

At a policy level separate, employability-oriented, awards are perceived positively:

*'Awards teach students how to translate their experiences into the language of graduate recruiters.'*

(QAA, 2012, p.2)

However, whether delivered as part of a national scheme or devised within an individual institution such awards are controversial. It has been argued that the rationale for the development of these awards is because students are not motivated to pursue the development of skills related to employability without the opportunity to gain an addition to their traditional degree transcript:



*'One reaction to this has been to force the students to take the key skills agenda more seriously by making it compulsory, by assessing it and by counting the assessment towards the degree classification. The heavy stick is applied when 'reason' does not seem to work.'*

(Atkins, 1999, p.274)

Some in the academic community see this as another sign of “utilitarian drift” in higher education:

*'The strategies of the universities are expected to be driven by competition, and the students and academics are supposed to be increasingly steered by incentives and sanctions. The underlying ideal is that managers, academics, and students should behave like a “homo oeconomicus,” an “economic animal,” a “status seeker,” or, in the language of David Riesman, as an “outer-directed personality.” Intrinsic motivations might not completely fade away, but they seem to be viewed as secondary these days.'*

(Teichler, 2014, p.159)

Individual universities have devised their own schemes that are intended to reward the development of employability-oriented skills. One such award, the York Award, offers a useful insight into approaches being adopted across the sector. The York Award is a certified programme based on experiential learning and transferable skills developed to compliment formal academic programmes. The scheme is operated as a partnership between the University of York and a

range of employers and voluntary organisations. Students are required to develop their own personal development plan tailored to enhance their graduate employability. Activities include developing skills through courses, volunteering, work experience and involvement in student union activities (CBI, 2011).

A similar scheme is operating at the University of Aberdeen. As well as capturing reflections on extra-curricular activities via ePortfolios, students are required to complete an interview through which students can enhance their awareness of employability-related attributes that they have developed (QAA Scotland, 2009).

The University of Dundee has adopted a points-based system as a means of motivating students in the development of transferable skills, capturing engagement and recognising the achievement of standards based on perceptions of the value of particular activities to employers (QAA Scotland, 2009).

Concerns have been raised that the proliferation of different employability-oriented awards from various universities causes confusion for employers. The importance of employer involvement in the development of such schemes is also highlighted (UKCES, 2010b).

A voluntary national scheme was borne out of The Burgess Report (Universities UK, 2007) and a new award, the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) was introduced as a means of capturing students' wider achievements at university:

*'[...] including academic work, extra-curricular activities, prizes and employability awards, voluntary work and offices held in student union clubs and societies that have been verified by the institution.'*

(HEAR, n.d.)

Uptake of the scheme has been gradual and many universities still provide their own schemes. However, as of 2015, 90 higher education institutions deliver or are in the process of implementing the HEAR (HEAR, n.d.). The scheme is supported nationally by the Higher Education Academy.

## **2.10 Employer / University Relationships**

The Wilson Review (2012) stated that:

*'Universities are an integral part of the skills and innovation supply chain to business. [...] This supply chain is multi-dimensional, it has to be sustainable, and it has to have quality, strength and resilience. These attributes can only be secured through close collaboration, partnership and understanding between business and universities.'*

(Wilson, 2012, p.ii)

Hogarth et al. (2007) offered an overview of the spectrum of HEI / employer relationships. Universities provide a number of products and services including the development of graduates, supporting workplace learning, professional development, research and consultancy. Employers can engage with universities passively through 'purchasing' the products of a university through recruiting graduates. Alternatively, employers can be more actively engaged with HEIs through working collaboratively to determine the nature of university outputs including graduate skills, workplace learning, research, innovation or consultancy. Hogarth et al. (2007) proposed a 'Typology of Employer-HEI Linkages' (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Typology of Employer-HEI Linkages (Hogarth et al., 2007, p.79)**

Industrial type	Type of link				
	Formal, systematic			Ad hoc	
	CPD/lifelong learning	R&D	Labour supply	CPD/lifelong learning	R&D
Large, old, mature – traditional graduate recruiters	For professional accreditation will source supply nationally, but for other types of activity tend to prefer local supply because of benefits of proximity.	A link will develop only if local HEI has a particular specialism and is sympathetic to an employers specific needs – otherwise will tend to seek supply nationally and internationally (depending upon scale of operation)	Tend to recruit nationally – unless a local university has a particular specialism or because the employer is looking for people to work in a local area.  Recruitment in the largest organisations will also be internationally targeted.	Individual employees studying for formal qualifications – MBAs etc will tend to favour local supply if available because of benefits of proximity (e.g. less travelling time, closer to tutors, etc.). Can have a rolling effect. Where one person studies locally and has a favourable experience then this is passed on within organisation.	There is a tendency to use existing links, of various types, to meet ad hoc requests for R&D. Within larger organisations their networks tend to be spread nationally and internationally
New, growing – more modern / niche graduate recruiters	Tend to prefer local supply – if available – because of benefits of proximity – lower travel costs, easier to contact teaching staff, etc.	Depends upon origins of organisation – i.e. a university spin off, developed by graduates from a local university, have been given previous assistance by HEI. Local links thought to be most effective but can be difficult to find local people within HEI to work with. If links outside the region they tend to be developed by seeking willing partners with a shared interest – discovered through scientific networks, conferences, journals, websites, or because of alumni links	Will tend towards local if local HEI can supply graduates and there is a ready access to the HEI. Also depends upon the scale of recruitment – the more people required the more likely the links will be developed with a significant number of HEI not just local ones	Individual employees studying for MBAs etc will tend to favour local supply if available because of benefits of proximity (e.g. less travelling time, closer to tutors, etc.). Depending upon size this can be a one-off arrangement for formal courses.	As above, but if a relatively small organisation there is recognition that a local link is easier to maintain because of proximity
SMEs	Prefer local because often do not have the resources to develop links outside of the region or have funds to send staff long distances to study. But sometimes poorly informed about local supply.	Local links recognised to be more effective – but depends upon local HEI being willing partners and SME being aware of local supply being available.	Tend towards the local where supply strong and the HEI is receptive towards needs – recognised as being efficient recruitment process	Individual employees studying for MBAs etc will tend to favour local supply if available because of the benefits of proximity. Tends to be a one-off arrangement for formal courses such as MBAs.	Local links recognised as bringing certain benefits. But will tend to associate with HEI where there is some existing link – in order to minimise transaction costs – such as where particular members of staff studied. Hence targeting is not necessarily local.
					Labour supply
					For just-in-time recruitment tend to use national networks for recruitment
					Will go local – if good local links – otherwise will recruit nationally. Less well placed – depending upon size – to recruit nationally since transaction costs high. But where targeting takes place this does not necessarily have a local dimension – i.e. will target HEI with which there is an existing link or has a reputation for supplying graduates of the type required.
					Will go local – if good local links – but often SMEs do not have these links resulting in high transaction costs to recruit a small number of recruits on a national basis.

A key driver for nurturing relationships with universities is to facilitate access to good quality graduates. Hogarth et al. (2007) noted that graduate recruitment is the key driver for employer engagement with HEIs and this market need can support other types of interactions such as guest lectures and course development. Such interactions can allow companies to promote opportunities with the organisation, which is particularly important if there is a skills shortage. It is noted that highly specialised companies that require recruits with particular technical or scientific knowledge have more of a propensity to pursue relationships with universities beyond straightforward recruitment and this can lead to placement opportunities for students studying science or engineering degrees:

*'Such courses tend to confer more 'specialist' knowledge in a particular field or subject, which often becomes more sought after by those employers who rely on such knowledge (who have to compete with other such businesses in order to obtain it).'*

(Hogarth et al., 2007, p.72)

Another key driver is joint research opportunities but relationships based on recruitment and research do not necessarily feed into curriculum development:

*'[...] it is important that those who develop relationships that bring innovations to business and industry reflect on how to share the benefits with students. [...] For example this can be achieved through the*

*enhancement of knowledge by adapting curriculum to reflect the application and transition of learning from the research.'*

(HECSU, 2011, p.12)

Although it has been acknowledged that higher education institutions and employers are working more closely together than ever before (Wedgwood, 2008), the Wilson Review (2012) whilst noting the progress that has been made in this area over the previous 10 years, highlighted that further development is required.

Various reports have noted issues around barriers to closer collaboration between universities and employers. Lack of experience in dealing with universities is an issue for some employers. One reason for this may be that their particular profession does not have a long history of recruiting from the graduate pool (Hogarth et al., 2007). Furthermore, universities can appear impenetrable to employers, particularly SMEs (Lambert, 2003).

Lambert (2003) noted that problems can be seen to be both cultural and structural. Problems around the mismatch of cultures, purpose and organisational structure between the higher education sector and business were further explored in the Wilson Review (2012). Key findings from this review were that the requirements of business were not aligned to university mission statements and strategies. Business and higher education work on different timescales, particularly in terms of raising funds and have mismatched

capabilities in terms of skill sets and facilities. Universities have different financial constraints and approaches to investment. Problems can also occur around intellectual property, and the management of indemnities and liabilities:

*'Perceptions amongst employers of HE - the irrelevance of courses, lack of flexibility, high cost, poor delivery, concerns of losing staff once educated and trained, the lack of an evidence base of business benefits – undermines confidence in the market in HE's ability to deliver effectively. Poor understanding of the role and value of a higher education amongst employers, and their lack of commitment to education and training undermined confidence in the HE sectors ability to make the workforce market significant in their business mix.'*

(Wedgwood, 2008, p.5)

The CBI (2013) found that whilst there were examples of universities working with employers in curriculum development, such collaborations were not made explicit to the students. In contrast, the issue of employers feeling that their inputs into curriculum development were ignored was raised and this was reported as an issue by Lowden et al. (2011).

Successful partnerships between employers and universities are often informal and could be centred on particular individuals. This can mean that such relationships lack underpinning and are susceptible to a loss of continuity if key individuals leave an organisation (Hogarth et al., 2007):



*'Business-university customer relationships are often underdeveloped, with both sides frequently citing difficulty in brokering relationships with each other. Partnerships often happen by chance – through existing connections or the will of strong leadership.'*

(CBI, 2013, p.23)

Connor and Hirsh (2008) noted that credible relationships between HEIs and employers are borne out of long-term strategic commitment on both sides. This level of sustained interaction has cost implications for both parties but the benefits of such collaboration are manifest in relationships that evolve and develop over time to the benefit of both employers and universities.

A key issue from a range of studies is the need for brokerage between business, particularly small businesses, and higher education:

*'One overall finding of the research is that employer engagement with HEI is sub-optimal, with employers put off by relatively high transactions costs, but that there is a substantial if latent demand for the services HEI provide. [...] For smaller employers, effective engagement with HEI is unlikely to be achieved by themselves, especially where their recruitment requirements are infrequent. Effective engagement is only likely to come about through some form of brokerage that allows them to connect more readily with the HEI when the need arises.'*

(Hogarth, 2007, p.vii)

The CBI (2013) noted that innovative partnerships between businesses and universities occur where universities have in place the appropriate infrastructure to sustain such relationships. The report also highlighted the need for business to take its share of responsibility to better exploit the potential of relationships with higher education institutions. Hogarth et al. (2007) also noted that employers need to reflect on their practices, whilst some employers have long-established relationships with particular universities, others have little contact with HEIs.

The Lambert Review (2003) highlighted the benefits of closer collaboration between higher education and industry. For businesses, the benefits of engagement with universities include access to highly skilled graduates, researchers, cutting-edge technology and international research networks as well as opportunities for continuing professional development for staff. For universities, the benefits of working more closely with businesses include enhanced access to funding, facilities and technology. Such partnerships can increase a university's profile in terms of regional and national economic development, offer insight into business problems and opportunities to retain and reward academic staff.

The Review encouraged opportunities for both formal and informal interactions between higher education and industry:

*'Innovation processes are complex and non-linear. It is not simply a question of researchers coming up with clever ideas which are passed down a production line to commercial engineers and marketing experts who turn them into winning products. Great ideas emerge out of all kinds of feedback loops, development activities and sheer chance.'*

(Lambert, 2003, p.12)

The Lambert Review (2003) concluded that universities need to do more to identify their key research areas, governments need to support collaboration between business and higher education and businesses need to do more to exploit the potential of innovations borne out of the HE sector.

Wedgwood (2008) observed positive developments in business / university collaborations. The growth of such partnerships is having an impact on the way in which degrees are conceived, designed and delivered. Wedgwood perceived of a more employability-oriented 'new tradition' within higher education:

*'The new tradition will encourage the harmonious, concurrent, integrated development of intellectual and occupational knowledge and skills in the context of employment. Work-based learning with an academic backbone is the critical component. The new tradition demands an ability to address the service needs of employers at the same time as safeguarding 'HE-ness' – its objectivity, rigour, creativity and imagination.'*

(Wedgwood, 2008, p.20)

UKCES (2009) offered suggestions for enhancing partnerships between universities and businesses. Recommendations included seeking the input of employers in course design, involving their staff in delivery and working to ensure links between what is being taught on the course and the workplace. The report highlights the need to ensure that the learning reflects the 'real world' through activity-based learning, ensuring clear expectations, allowing for failure and keeping the ultimate focus on graduate employment. The value of placements is highlighted and should be built into the structure of courses. Students should be encouraged to reflect on their learning and the development of the programme. To ensure the engagement of all students, programmes should be flexible and varied with appropriate support given to all learners.

As another example of the use of metrics to drive change within higher education, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU, 2011) noted that the impact of closer collaboration between universities and businesses is reflected in KIS data which is publically accessible.

The Wilson Review (2012) contained various suggestions for improvement including universities and employers taking a dynamic approach to the development of networking opportunities, noting that regulatory changes should enhance opportunities for interaction. Business and university leadership should be reflective in the consideration of their approach to business-university collaboration:

*'Supply chains that excel in performance are those where collaboration is strong and resilient; where there is constant communication in both directions, both operational and strategic; where there is a common understanding of the objectives of the other party; where there is a willingness to change existing practices to meet the needs of the collaborators; and where the boundaries of capability are transparent and respected.'*

(Wilson, 2012, p.13)

The Review recommended the creation of a new national forum to support relationships between employers and universities. The report also encouraged universities to make best use of industry advisory groups and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) which are perceived as being a particularly important resource for SMEs.

## **2.11 Stakeholders / Stakeholder Management**

Freeman (1984) defined stakeholders as:

*'[...] any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of a corporation's purpose.'*

(Freeman, 1984, p.vi)

Mitchell et al. (1997) suggested that stakeholders can be identified by having one or more of the following attributes:

*'(1) the stakeholder's power to influence the firm, (2) the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm, and (3) the urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the firm.'*

(Mitchel et al., 1997, p.854)

Jongbloed et al. (2008) explored stakeholder theory in the context of higher education. University's communities are complete and diverse. Internal communities include academics and students, administrative staff and management. External communities, which may extend to global communities, include research groups, alumni, businesses, government bodies and professional associations:

*'Implicit in this description of communities are notions of relationships, environment, expectations and responsibilities.'*

(Jongbloed et al., 2008, p.305)

Maassen (2000) summarised key changes in recent years with regard to stakeholder involvement in higher education. Whilst previously, government and institutional representatives dominated policy networks, other external groups now have a more prominent role. External factors are now more directly

involved within the universities themselves, perhaps through institution governance or teaching.

Margherita and Secundo (2009) highlight the trends impacting on universities in the 21st century:

*'[...] mass individualization, the emergence of the knowledge society, social dynamics, information and communication technologies and globalization'*

(Margherita and Secundo, 2009,  
p.176)

Margherita and Secundo noted that changes in the socio-economic system and the rise of the network economy means that universities need to be in continuous dialogue with stakeholders.

Universities are required to be more outward-facing than ever before and to pursue dynamic relationships with a range of stakeholders. Each university is now obliged to make decisions as to how to balance the varying demands:

*'The university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself.'*

(Kerr, C., 2001, p.7)

Jongbloed et al. (2008) noted that universities are now obliged to identify and rank the importance of stakeholders. Having identified key stakeholders working practices need to be established and any barriers to interactions need to be considered. They identified three types of barriers:

*'1. the determination of the research agenda and the educational offerings of universities;*

*2. the internal reward structure of universities;*

*3. the lack of an entrepreneurial culture in universities.'*

(Jongbloed, et al., 2008, p.316)

In their consideration of these barriers, universities must also reflect on the perceived relative value of each stakeholder to the institution. In applying Mitchell et al.'s (1997) three stakeholder attributes:

*'It is also important to note that power, legitimacy and urgency can change—they are not static, but dynamic.'*

(Jongbloed et al., 2008, p.310)

Whilst some stakeholders may be perceived as more important than others to a particular university, it is crucial that HEIs consider processes to capture the input of stakeholders from different sized institutions and to what extent such stakeholders are representing their own views or can be perceived as speaking on behalf of other enterprises of similar stature. Stakeholder management is



crucial within higher education at this time as such a highly dynamic situation can undermine overall strategic development as HEIs try to fulfil the demands of disparate stakeholder groups (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

Arbo and Benneworth (2007) noted that such changes to the culture of higher education whereby universities have to take a more entrepreneurial approach can create difficulties that require changes to a university's governance structure. Maassen (2000) commented that universities have adapted to these new demands by establishing formal structures in order to work effectively with stakeholders. In this dynamic environment of changing organisational structures, missions and demands being placed on HEIs, the cultural shift may be reflected in the extent to which stakeholders may now wish to be involved.

Jongbloed et al. (2008) highlighted the importance of relationships with stakeholders for universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

*'[...] the legitimacy of higher education in society will increasingly be a direct function of the nature, quality and evolving ties with the Stakeholder Society.'*

(Jongbloed et al., 2008, p. 307)

## **2.12 Conclusions**

It is evident from the review of literature that the higher education sector is currently in the midst of a cultural shift; the very notions of what is understood by a university education and in particular, the extent to which universities are responsible for preparing students for graduate employment is having an impact on the perspectives of key stakeholders. There has been extensive research into what is meant by graduate employability and the needs of employers along with various reports and initiatives designed to act as catalysts for change. Universities are now more accountable than ever before for the quality of services they provide through ease of access to the results of metrics designed to measure and act as drivers for change. However, there is little research into the perspectives of key stakeholders as they adapt to this dynamic environment where students may be perceived as customers of university-developed products designed to fulfil the needs of employers as the end purchasers of well-prepared graduates, the end products of this system.

The focus of this study and the research questions informed the literature review. The framework emerging from this review highlighted the following major themes that would be the focus of the empirical research.

In order to gain insight into the philosophical basis of the attitudes of all individuals involved in this study it was important to explore their views as to the purpose of higher education.

One of the key issues highlighted at the start of the literature review is the scope for differing interpretation as to what is meant by employability and furthermore the requirements of employers. Capturing the perspectives of individuals from each stakeholder group would allow for the exploration of these contentious areas.

The focus of this study is an investigation of perceptions of how employability policy has been translated into university strategy. This major theme led to the exploration of the following key areas: stakeholder perceptions of the emphasis on the enhancement of graduate employability, the university's role in developing these attributes, initiatives designed to capture and reward evidence of transferable skills and an exploration of interactions between universities and employers.

These major themes informed the development of the conceptual framework which will be discussed in the Methodology.

## **CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The thesis research explores some of the key areas related to graduate employability in a specific context. Whilst the review of literature related to graduate employability demonstrated the breadth of current research, there was perceived to be an opportunity to explore this dynamic area in the setting of a particular discipline area. The consideration of stakeholder perspectives of issues related to graduate employability for this thesis presents new knowledge through the exploration of key issues in the context of a niche course type.

In order to achieve an understanding of a range of perspectives, the study is based on the analysis of a rich stream of qualitative data captured through interviews, focus groups and a survey. In choosing to follow a qualitative methodology that draws upon the perspectives of key stakeholder groups, the findings of this study are not generalisable. However, the detailed exploration of perspectives provided by this research has the potential to be relatable to practitioners in a range of disciplines across the sector.

A range of issues were explored via semi-structured interviews with individuals working at policy level and employers (see APPENDIX D. Semi-Structured Interviews / Focus Groups – Questions Framework). Feedback was elicited via one to one interviews and focus groups with academics. Data was

gathered from students via an online questionnaire (see APPENDIX E. Survey).

Issues raised through the survey were further explored through semi-structured focus group discussions with students.

This chapter provides insight into the conceptual framework, considers the reasoning behind the chosen methodology and will include reflections on the methods used for data gathering.

### **3.2 Conceptual Framework**

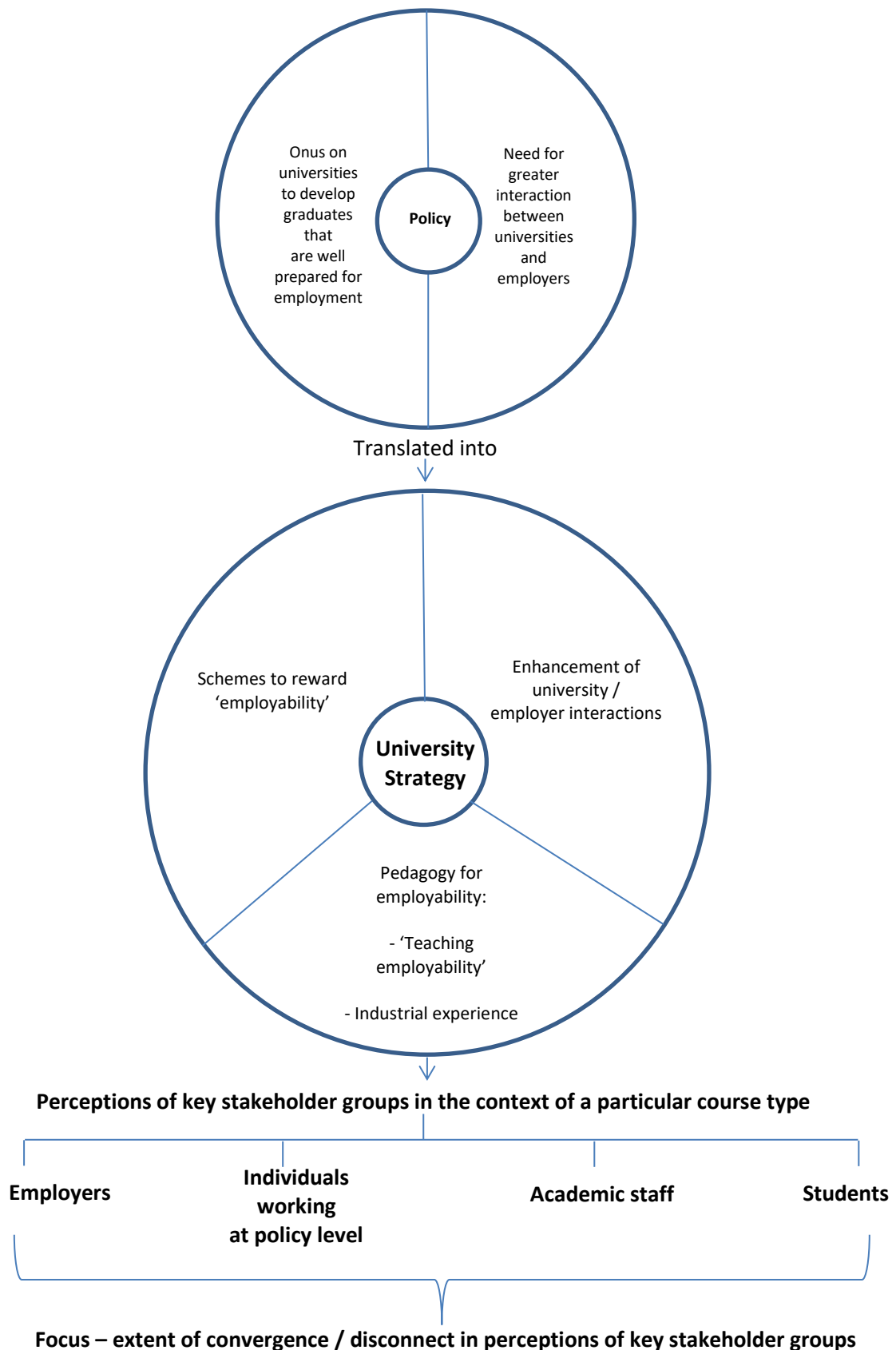
The motivation for this research was to offer new knowledge discovered through the consideration of the perspectives of stakeholders directly affected by changes in the approach to the enhancement of graduate employability in higher education.

As previously discussed, in order to engage with this subject area it is important to develop an understanding of the background to the issues. Whilst such underpinning knowledge offers a foundation to this study the particular focus of this thesis was on the current perspectives of key stakeholder groups within a particular discipline.

The development of the conceptual framework (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008) for this research was borne out of the research questions and the literature

review. The following diagram encapsulates the conceptual framework (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Conceptual Framework – Perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy**



The review of literature underlined that policy designed to enhance graduate employability is consistently focused on two areas:

- the onus on universities to develop graduates that are well prepared for employment,
- the need for greater interaction between universities and employers.

In response to such continued steerage, university strategy can be seen to focus on key issues and it is these areas that were of primary concern in the gathering of empirical evidence for this research:

- Enhancement of university / employer interactions
- Pedagogy for employability ('teaching employability' / industrial experience)
- Schemes to reward 'employability'

In line with over-arching policy, universities have developed strategies for employer engagement (Hogarth et al., 2007). Whilst the rhetoric of university and course marketing may highlight such interactions (Pegg et al., 2012), a key area for this study is to explore stakeholder perceptions as to how this operates in practice.

Similarly, universities are obliged to develop graduate employability as part of course delivery (Dearing, 1997) and the pedagogy for employability (HEA, 2006) has evolved. This study explores stakeholder perceptions of strategies for the enhancement of employability as a core component of all degrees.



Initiatives to reward student engagement with activities that may serve to enhance their employability have been one consequence of developments in this area (Universities UK, 2007). The views of stakeholders on the implementation of such schemes offers insight into perceptions of the viability and credibility of employability strategies adopted by universities.

Opportunities for students to gain industrial experience tend to be seen as beneficial to the enhancement of their employability (Lowden et al., 2011) and it is important to explore issues arising from such experiences and perceptions of such schemes.

The following section considers how the conceptual framework was explored through the research design.

### **3.3 Research Design**

*'In designing research, we need to consider the issues of how to choose a research project, how to plan it, how to conduct a literature search and review, and how to ensure that the project is practicable.'*

(Cohen et al., 2007, p.73)

The focus of this research was chosen in order to make a significant contribution to the research material currently available that explores the complexities of graduate employability. Whilst much has been written on this

subject, a review of the literature suggested that there was an opportunity to explore perceptions of employability through the prism of a particular course type, in this instance BSc Music Technology-oriented degree courses.

As an experienced programmer leader with a background in teaching, course development and having carried out prior research in a related area, I felt well placed to draw and build upon my contacts in academia and industry in order to shape and drive this research. For this to be a feasible undertaking, the practicalities of the research design were such that the focus needed to be borne out of and feed back into my current role within a university. My experience of this process is that there was significant crossover between these two aspects of my professional life. I have witnessed the shift in emphasis towards ever greater focus on employability in my own university over the period of this study and my known interest in this area has been called upon to feed into new initiatives at both a Faculty and University level.

The review of literature involved the consideration of a wealth of material. Enhancing graduate employability is not a new phenomenon but the importance of this aspect of a university education has risen in prominence over the last twenty years bringing an exponential growth of research in its wake.

At the research design stage, a purposive approach to sampling was chosen in order to exploit the potential of my established relationships with contacts in

the audio industry and academia. Cohen et al. (2007) highlighted that whilst purposive sampling is limited by a lack of generalisability; the strength of this approach is in terms of obtaining the insight of experts. Again, the adoption of a methodology based on the gathering of a rich stream of qualitative data was such that whilst the findings would resonate with the relevant stakeholder groups, wider generalisations could not be made. However, in offering a detailed account of the data gathering process, the reader is offered the opportunity to consider the transferability of the findings (Toma, 2006).

The size of the sample groups were carefully considered in order to achieve a feasible balance between the scope of data to be gathered and the number of individuals required to offer an appropriate level of credible research material. With regard to the survey of student perspectives, volunteer sampling was adopted as access to individuals at different universities was not possible. Again, although data collected in this way would not allow for generalisability, it did provide insight into the opinions of the target groups.

### **3.4 Research Aims**

The aim of this research is to explore, in the context of a specific course-type, stakeholder perceptions of the implementation of policy that typically espouses an integrated approach for the enhancement of graduate employability. The key research questions were as follows:

- What is understood by graduate employability? To what extent do all stakeholders have a common understanding of the term?
- What are stakeholder perceptions of university employability policy?
- How do stakeholders perceive the ways in which employability policy is translated into university strategy?

### 3.5 Research Methodology

In terms of situating the epistemological and methodological position of my research, I explored this area from a broadly naturalistic perspective, drawing on social constructivist interpretivist perspectives; social constructivism for the emphasis on an individual's learning that takes place through group interactions and interpretivism for the focus on developing understanding socially and experientially. This theoretical underpinning is rooted in relativist ontology where:

*'[...] there exist multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by natural laws, causal or otherwise [...].'*

(Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 86)

An interpretivist approach rejects objectivity and the possibility of collecting 'facts' in social research:

*'All research is interpretive, guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood or studied...each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, including questions that are asked and the interpretations that are brought to them.'*

(Denzin and Lincoln in Dunne  
et al, 2005, p.84)

Mason highlights the benefits of qualitative research for the exploration of complex social settings:

*'Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate.'*

(Mason, 2002, p.1)

Bryman highlights the opportunity to explore perspectives through such an interpretivist approach:

*'[...] the stress is on understanding of social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants [...]'*

(Bryman, 2015, p. 375)

In order for qualitative research to be credible the researcher needs to be open about their own identity, beliefs and values:

*'[...] qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of the knowledge [...]. The subjectivity of the researcher and of those being studied becomes part of the research process'.*

(Flick, 2009, p.16)

In order to address this, there follows my reflexive account and short biography.

### **3.6 Reflexive Account**

I entered higher education as a mature student having previously had involvement in a number of areas related to the music industry. On becoming a lecturer I drew on my insight as a recent student and a wealth of industrial experience which was aligned to the course type that I became involved with.

As an experienced senior lecturer and programme leader I have nurtured a range industrial contacts over the years. Student placements have offered one source of employer engagement. When visiting students on placement, I look to establish on-going partnerships through links with individual professionals

which may lead to involvement in guest lectures or perhaps course validation events.

Through informal channels, typically via online social networks, I keep in contact with alumni. Typically, those graduates that have gone on to pursue course-related employment continue to be supportive of the course and offer their time and experience through guest lectures and via online discussions with current students.

In the context of the type of vocational course that I am involved with, I am an advocate of pro-actively seeking interactions with a range of company types; from micro companies, SMEs through to larger organisations. Such professional networks, alongside my academic networks, offered the basis for the gathering of data for this research.

I had established relationships with most of the employers and some of academics that agreed to be part of this study. A foundation of previous engagement facilitated openness in our discussions. Whilst it could be said that some of the individuals involved in this study had something to be gained from ongoing partnerships with the university where I am based, the nature of our relationships was such that they seemed open in their responses.

As previously noted, I did not have such established relationships with the individuals that I interviewed that were working at a policy level. Again, I did not detect any guardedness in responses.

I did not know any of the students involved in the main body of the data collection.

### **3.7 Research Methods**

In terms of units of analysis, this research involved the collection of data from five universities supplemented by data gathered from a range of employers and individuals involved in the development and implementation of government-led (or supported) initiatives related to higher education and employability.

In order to address the issue of validity I adopted a process of triangulation whereby a mix of methods of data collection were utilised. Denzin (1984) suggested four types of triangulation; data source, investigator, theory and methodological. This followed a methodological approach to triangulation whereby different methods were adopted in order to increase confidence in the interpretation of the findings.

This section will outline and evaluate the research instruments used in this study; semi-structured interviews, focus groups (see APPENDIX D. Semi-



Structured Interviews / Focus Groups – Questions Framework) and a survey (see APPENDIX E. Survey).

The focus of this study was on gaining insight into the perspectives of a range of stakeholders. Although quantitative data was gathered from students via the online survey as a method of exploring trends across a wider number of subjects, the natural focus for this research would be on the collection of qualitative data. Whilst the emphasis on qualitative data limits the potential for generalisation, the benefit in this particular context is that the nuances of a range of perspectives can be explored:

*'Numbers are never enough: they have to refer to concepts established through qualitative analysis. While quantities are powerful precisely because of the complex mathematical operations they permit, they mean nothing in themselves unless they are based on meaningful conceptualizations. In other words, social science (and science for that matter) without qualitative data would not connect up with the world in which we live.'*

(Dey, 1993, p.27)

### **3.7.1 Semi-Structured Interviews**

In-depth interviews are appropriate for the collection of data based on:

- Opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences

- Sensitive issues
- Privileged information

*‘The depth of information provided by interviews can produce best ‘value for money’ if the informants are willing and able to give information that others could not – when what they offer is insight they have as people in a special position ‘to know’.’*

(Denscombe, 2010, p.174)

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken as a means of exploring a pre-conceived list of issues with the potential for flexibility. This approach allows the interviewee the opportunity to develop ideas and elaborate on issues as they choose. In terms of validity, this approach offers the researcher the opportunity to seek clarification from the interviewee as the data is collected. However, in terms of reliability the influence of the interviewer and the situation in which the interview is being conducted cannot be ignored (Denscombe, 2010).

The structure of the interview questions was developed in part through feedback gained through pilot studies (see APPENDIX B. Pilot Study Presentation).

Taylor et al. (2006) highlighted the importance of carrying out pilot studies when devising questions for semi-structured interviews and surveys. The pilot

study should focus on the relevance and clarity of the questions being asked and consider any ambiguity as highlighted by the respondents to the pilot study as well as considering if further questions should be added. Insight offered by academic colleagues at my own institution and feedback gained from an established relationship with an employer fed into the design and structure of the questions to be posed. For instance, one of the outcomes of the pilot study was that interviewees should be encouraged to consider the wider social and political context impacting upon graduate employability. It was deemed appropriate to place more open questions such as this towards the end of the interview. Having captured a solid foundation of responses to more tightly framed questions, there is an opportunity at this stage in the interview for a more open discussion.

Each interview began with an introduction to the research area and a consent form was given to the interviewee for signature (see

APPENDIX C. Consent Form). It was made explicit that the interview would be captured via a digital recorder for later transcription and analysis and that all respondents would be anonymised. The interview was based on a semi-structured list of questions (see APPENDIX D. Semi-Structured Interviews / Focus Groups – Questions Framework).

Interviews tended to take between three quarters to one hour although one interview lasted for two hours. Most of the interviews were one-to-one although two involved two interviewees. On both occasions one respondent tended to dominate. Typically, interviewees were in their workplace, a few were at home, and a minority were conducted in the university where I am based.

The majority of the interviews were carried out face-to-face although for practical reasons video conferencing technology was used for some interviews. One of the interviews was conducted over the telephone. The three different methods did not seem to affect the depth of the responses or the willingness of the interviewees to engage with the questions.

### **3.7.2 Focus Groups**

Focus group discussions were used as an efficient method to capture feedback from small groups of academic staff and students. The structure of the discussions was based on the interview questionnaire (see APPENDIX D. Semi-Structured Interviews / Focus Groups – Questions Framework) although this had to be adapted depending on time constraints:

*'Focus groups make a particular use of group dynamics and have three distinctive features:*

- *there is a focus to the session, with a group discussion being based on an item or experience about which all participants have similar knowledge;*
- *particular emphasis is placed on the interaction within the group as a means of eliciting information;*
- *the moderator's role is to facilitate the group interaction rather than lead the discussion.'*

(Denscombe, 2010, p.177)

Again, each focus group started with an introduction to the research area and a consent form was given to the participants for signature. It was made clear that the discussion would be captured via a digital recorder for later transcription and analysis. The focus groups lasted between half an hour and one hour.

My experience of the focus groups is that group dynamics and the size of the group in particular as well as the situation in which the discussion takes place all have an impact on the nature and depth of the discussion. For instance, one of the focus groups with academics consisted of three members of staff in a quiet, private room and this discussion was very similar in tone to a one-to-one interview. In contrast, another focus group with a larger group of academics involved members of staff joining and leaving the discussion as it progressed. The discussion took place over lunchtime in a common room. This debate was much livelier and at times difficult to rein in.

Similarly the focus groups with students were very different and this seemed in part down to the location in which the discussion was taking place, the number of students involved and the stage at which the students were studying. One of the focus groups took place in a large computer laboratory with a group of 25 second year students. The students were spread around the room and in front of computer screens. It was difficult for the rest of the group to hear individual responses and the feedback tended to be more guarded.

In contrast, the second focus group at the same university involved a smaller group of final year students again in a computer laboratory. This was a much more lively debate and various students ventured strongly held views. The focus group itself stimulated the discussion as the respondents pitched often contrasting points of view.

### **3.7.3 Survey**

An online survey was used as a method for the remote capture of feedback from a larger student body. Hartas (2010) noted that surveys:

*[...] are especially useful when studying educational issues and events that are fluid and cannot be manipulated experimentally [...] involving multiple contexts and diverse participants.'*

(Hartas, 2010, p.258)

Clarity and consideration of the most appropriate approach for the design of each question was achieved through an iterative process involving an initial pilot questionnaire which was discussed in a focus group with students at my own institution. The scope of the research was such that it was difficult to hone this down to a questionnaire that would be acceptable in terms of complexity and the time required for completion. The structure of the questionnaire was carefully considered in terms of the placement of different types of query. It was imperative that the most important questions were placed towards the start in case the respondent chose not to complete the whole survey.

Different answer types were utilised from simple 'yes / no' to those that required the ranking of responses. Care was taken to include options to elaborate on answers; more open questions were placed towards the end of the questionnaire.

The choice of platform for the delivery of the survey was important: the survey needed to look appealing; allow for a variety of question types and be straightforward for the respondent to use. The online tool 'SurveyMonkey' was found to fulfil the required criteria and was used for this survey (see APPENDIX E. Survey).

Whilst there were issues in getting enough students to attempt the survey, once they started, the dropout rate was relatively low. The statistics show that of the 63 students that started the survey, the responses were solid until question 6

when 3 respondents chose not to continue and question 7 when 7 more students chose to drop out. The remaining 53 students continued to complete the survey to the end. Questions 6 and 7 were comparatively more complex in terms of the feedback required and this may have been a factor (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

In terms of qualitative feedback, the information elicited by students through the survey was very useful.

### **3.8 Establishing the Sample Groups**

8 one to one / one to two interviews were carried out with individuals working at a policy level related to higher education of which 1 was a telephone interview and 1 utilised video conferencing software. The individuals working at policy level were not known to me prior to the commencement of this research. In order to build contacts in this area I attended various conferences, sought out experts in this area and spoke to these individuals about the nature of my research. This initial contact was followed by a request to be part of this study. All of the individuals approached in this way agreed to participate. Whilst this purposeful approach to sampling could not be said to be representative of a wider population, the benefit of this approach was that I was able to focus on experts with extensive experience in this area. For example, one individual was close to retirement and was keen to share his years of experience of graduate recruitment.



14 one to one / one to two interviews were conducted with employers, of which 4 were carried out via video conferencing software. Again, a purposeful approach to sampling was adopted. Most of the employers were previously known to me or came through recommendations.

The universities were chosen via a mix of established relationships with the leaders of music technology-oriented courses and networking at conferences. Again, all of those approached were keen to offer their support. In terms of the input of students at these institutions, the numbers of respondents to the survey varied across the five institutions. One of the courses is small in terms of student numbers and although the programme leader at the university was supportive, he was only able to get five students to complete the survey. At another university my contact was only able to elicit one response.

Such low response rates were countered with improved rates elsewhere. I drew upon a contact, a course leader at another university and through his intervention, managed to gather responses from nine students.

The key to the higher response rates at two universities, thirteen and thirty-four respectively, was that my links with these institutions were based on established links borne out of external examining.

Student responses to the online questionnaire were supplemented with 3 focus group discussions with students across the two institutions with the higher survey response rates.

Data was also collected via 1 interview with an academic (via a video conference) and a further 2 focus group discussions with academic staff.

In total, 25 hours of sound recordings captured from interviews and focus groups were captured, transcribed and analysed. This data was enhanced with online questionnaires that were completed by 63 students across the 5 higher education institutions. (see APPENDIX E. Units of Analysis).

### **3.9 Ethical Issues**

BERA guidelines (BERA, 2011) state that ultimately it is the responsibility of individual researchers to demonstrate respect for the participants (see APPENDIX A. Ethical Approval Form). Voluntary informed consent was confirmed from each participant before involvement in the study (see

APPENDIX C. Consent Form).

A key issue for this study, particularly in the pilot stage, was my dual role as practitioner researcher. I was mindful to reassure all participants of the

confidential nature of their involvement. When conducting the pilot study with students at my own institution, I was careful to reassure them that although my normal relationship with them was as their programmer leader and one of their lecturers, in this context I was in the role of researcher. Mindful of potential issues borne out of the relative power in our relationships I was keen to reassure them that the context of our discussion was such that they could be completely open in their comments.

During a focus group with academic staff, one of the members of staff wished for one of his comments to be off the record. The same member of staff had concerns about anonymity and had to be reassured that all responses would be anonymised and anything that was said off the record would not be used.

Pseudonyms were introduced as part of the process of data analysis with corresponding lists linking actual names with aliases destroyed upon completion of the study (Oliver, 2003).

Data collected from participants has been stored securely; participants have been able to have access to personal information held about them upon request. No personal information has been passed on to third parties.

Any participant that wished to withdraw from the study would have been able to do so at any stage and any feedback that they may have wished to withdraw

would have been carefully considered. Such a situation did not occur during this study.

Incentives were not used to encourage involvement but overall, the research design is such that the participants were made aware of the wider benefits to their involvement in terms of improving issues related to student employability in the future. Participants also had an active role in shaping the research itself, particularly in the pilot phase.

Upon completion of this study all participants will be advised via email along with guidance as to how the thesis might be accessed. Participants will also be informed of any subsequent publications borne out of this research.

This research adhered to the aforementioned standard protections but moreover:

*'[...] the full meaning of the phrase "respecting their dignity, their integrity, and their privacy" goes well beyond such standard protections. It reaches to the level of full participative involvement, in which the stakeholders and others who may be drawn into the evaluation are welcomed as equal partners in every aspect of design, implementation, interpretation, and resulting action of an evaluation [...]'*

(Guba and Lincoln, 1989,  
p.11).

### 3.10 Data Analysis

*'Through analysis, we can obtain a fresh view of our data. We can progress from initial description, through the process of breaking data down into bits, and seeing how these bits interconnect, to a new account based on our reconceptualization of the data. We break down the data in order to classify it, and the concepts we create or employ in classifying the data, and the connections we make between these concepts, provide the basis of a fresh description.'*

(Dey, 1993, p.30)

In order to process the interview material the sound files needed to be transcribed. As part of this process a simple system of coding was used to indicate which anonymised individual was speaking.

Individual transcriptions were transferred into NVIVO, specialised software for qualitative data analysis. Classifications within NVIVO are labelled as 'nodes' and nodes were created based on condensed keywords borne out of the interview questions. Having initially reviewed all of the interviews, I proceeded to go through each interview and began the process of attributing classifications to quotes. As part of this iterative process new classifications were created and classifications were consolidated:

*'Without classifying the data, we have no way of knowing what it is that we are analysing. Nor can we make meaningful comparisons between different bits of data. It would be wrong to say that before we can analyse data, we must classify it, for classifying the data is an integral part of the analysis: it lays the conceptual foundations upon which interpretation and explanation are based.'*

(Dey, 1993, p.41)

This process of analysis and classification allowed me to 'get inside' the data and start to draw connections across the different interviews and focus groups.

Whilst the software was ideally suited to this process of classification, I found it useful to further explore each group of data via extensive use of tables within word processing software. A key part of the process was the requirement to be very selective with data to be used to illustrate the various emergent themes.

Quantitative data and verbatim comments collected via the student survey were fed into the analysis of each aspect of the study. Whilst the use of more sophisticated statistical analysis software such as SPSS was considered, the size of the sample group and the type of data collected was such that this would not have offered any added value.

### **3.11 Summary and Limitations**

Respondents were very generous in the giving of their time to contribute to this study. Academic staff at various higher education institutions were genuinely interested in the subject area and offered in-depth and very candid feedback. Individuals working at a policy level were keen to share their perspectives and on occasion made suggestions as to other individuals that I should approach for an interview.

Employers seemed to welcome the opportunity to discuss graduate employability from their perspective as 'purchasers' of graduate talent. They offered insightful and detailed feedback across the full range of issues discussed. Focus groups, both with academic staff and separately with students, had a different dynamic to the one-to-one interviews and elicited some very interesting feedback.

I was pleased with the level of response to the student survey. I was unknown to the students in the subject universities and relied upon my contacts to encourage the students to complete the questionnaire. Although a minority of respondents did not fully complete the survey those that did took the time to carefully consider each question and offered insightful verbatim comments.

A key limitation for this study is the lack of generalisability. However, if carefully designed then such a study can be of value to others working in the same area:

*'In qualitative research, each participant in the relatively small sample has been selected purposefully for the contribution he or she can make toward the emerging theory. It is this selecting that ensures that the theory is comprehensive, complete, saturated, and accounts for negative cases.'*

(Morse, 1999, p.5)

Such relatability depends on the authenticity of the research that has been carried out. Care has been taken to explain the chosen approach and the motivations behind this methodology. Established relationships and new contacts with a range of individuals carefully chosen for their extensive experience in this area have been drawn upon for this study. My own background and motivations have been summarised in order to maximise the potential for others working in this discipline to gain insight from this study.

The limitations of the chosen research instruments; semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys were considered.

Whilst offering the potential for in-depth responses from experts in the field, the nature of semi-structured interviews is such that discussions can digress and it is not always easy to compare feedback from one interview to the next if the comments are not borne out of specific questions. However, the opportunity for interviewees to have some ownership in the direction of the discussions helped to elicit in-depth responses. Some of the standout verbatim quotes in the



Findings section were borne out opportunities for respondents to explore issues more fully.

Surveys are limited by the number of respondents who are prepared to invest the time in completion. Although this was an issue for this study, persistence and the involvement of supportive third parties lead to the gathering of a credible level of feedback.

Whilst by their very nature, a limitation of a survey is the set structure of the questions being asked, care was taken at the pilot study stage to ensure clarity and encourage the engagement of respondents. Moreover, the inclusion of follow-up focus groups allowed for the further investigation of the issues raised.

One of the limitations that was recognised in the use of focus groups was the issue of over-dominance of the discussions by particular individuals. Whilst it was evident that individuals within the group did have more to say on the issues, great care was taken to try and elicit feedback from the whole group. Sometimes standout phrases were derived from those who were seen to be less domineering in the discussions.

Overall, the qualitative methodology and choice of research instruments meant that data gathering was carried out over a number of months but this allowed for the consideration of data as it was obtained and for refinements to be made to the process as it evolved.

## **CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter the research methodology and methods of data collection were discussed, including the research design, aims and conceptual framework. The chapter described how the over-arching research questions were developed into a series of more detailed questions through pilot studies. The methods of data collection incorporating semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a survey were explained. The chapter considered data validation, ethical issues and the approach to data analysis.

This chapter presents the findings of the research study. It discusses the responses received from the four groups of stakeholders: individuals working at policy level, academics, students and employers. The structure of the presentation of findings is based on the research questions and conceptual framework.

In order to gain an understanding of the perceptions that underpin the views of the participants it was important to explore the purpose of a university education at a philosophical level. Such perspectives inform perceptions of employability and support the exploration as to the extent of common understanding of the term. This extends to an exploration of perspectives as to the attributes employers require from graduates. The section concludes with a

consideration of perspectives regarding the rise of prominence of graduate employability as an issue in higher education.

Having established this foundation, the chapter is structured around the conceptual framework. Stakeholder perceptions are explored through a consideration of the extent to which it is the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability.

The focus then explores university strategies designed to address shifts in policy. Pedagogy for the enhancement of attributes perceived to benefit employability is investigated, both in terms of approaches to delivery within the curriculum and the perceived benefits of industrial experience as part of a degree programme.

The development of initiatives to reward evidence of experience that might improve employability is also considered.

The enhancement of employer/university relationships is a constant in employability policy and perceptions as to how this might be achieved are explored across the stakeholder groups.

The implications of the extent of convergence of views across the stakeholder groups is considered within each section and consolidated at the end of the chapter. Short citations are used to indicate the respective stakeholder group

for each of the originators of the quotes used in this chapter. Whilst care has been taken to anonymise all sources, more detail as to the background of the interviewees can be found in the Appendix (see APPENDIX F. Key for Interviewees Quoted in Findings). The clear indication of the stakeholder group to which the individual is aligned facilitates the presentation of evidence to support the interpretation of the emergence of themes drawn from across the data.

## **4.2 The Purpose of a University Education**

*'I'm not sure there's one single purpose. I think it's a range of purposes. Some people might say it's about creating well-rounded individuals for life. Some might say it's about lifelong learning, and instilling lifelong learning. Others might say, from the employability angle, it's about feeding the sausage machine of industry, that it's purely about making sure that society runs smoothly by providing the troops for the next wave of industrialisation.'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

The review of the literature would suggest a prevailing trend towards the acceptance that the purpose of a university education involves the enhancement of graduate employability and that this should be a key part of an

undergraduate experience (Cranmer, 2006). The findings of this study would support this generalisation. However, when exploring the feedback in more detail distinct differences are evident across the four stakeholder groups with evidence of a disconnect between the perceptions of students when compared to the other stakeholder groups: individuals working at a policy/senior management level within higher education, academic staff and employers.

Feedback collected via this study would suggest that there is a level of common understanding as to the purpose of a university education across those working at a policy level, employers and academics, with a general consensus that emphasises a holistic approach to the value of a university education and the opportunities for self-transformation afforded by such an experience.

Individuals working at policy level were unanimous in their assertion that employability is intrinsic to a university education. From the point of view of a senior manager within a university, degrees are perceived as a vehicle by which students:

*'[...] acquire a range of knowledge and skills, specialist knowledge in their chosen field and analytic skills that can be used either in writing or in discussion. It means that they can engage in a whole range of different areas'*

(Policy Level 6, university  
management, national bodies)

This perspective is indicative of the pervading approach from those operating at a policy level as indicated by Harvey (2003) although it lacks the inclusion of the benefits to wider economy as highlighted by the CBI (Wilson, 2012) or to the greater good of society as emphasised by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (Glass, 2013). However, these benefits to health, wealth and wider engagement with society were noted in an interview with another senior manager within a university.

The importance of feeding industry with workers who are well prepared for the workplace was highlighted by an individual working at a publicly funded, industry-led organisation but she noted that it is unrealistic for employers to expect graduates to be totally prepared for particular graduate positions. This sentiment echoes that of Atkins (1999) in her assertion that employers should not abdicate all responsibility for the transition into the workplace and to expect graduates to *'[...]hit the ground running'* (Atkins, 1999 p.274)

Employers who are graduates themselves highlighted that a degree is now perceived as essential for some industries. They stated that degree courses can act as a bridge in that they prepare students for the workplace, honing skills and supporting students as they consider which particular career path they wish to pursue. A degree provides opportunities for developing a foundation of knowledge. This feedback from employers resonates with an emphasis on the utilitarian purpose of an undergraduate degree typical of policy level

perspectives as espoused by bodies such as the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (Belt et al., 2010).

For one employer, a graduate himself, a degree should offer the opportunity to gain fundamental knowledge which allows the individual to enter the graduate jobs market with confidence:

*'The important thing would be, in my view, to equip students with a toolbox of skills which would then lead to confidence, because confidence, actually, in oneself, is the thing that gets you the job, and it really doesn't matter what you're trained in if you have the confidence to go forward and put yourself forward, and retrain yourself internally to do whatever's on offer [...]'*

(Employer 10, specialist  
support for live events)

The importance of confidence resonates with Lees' (2002) assertion that employers want graduates who can demonstrate positivity and self-confidence.

Previous studies have emphasised the shift in emphasis whereby many graduates are now working for SMEs rather than larger organisations which may have been the norm in the past (Branine, 2008). Most of the employers interviewed for this study were from SMEs. One was from a specialist company which was part of a much larger group. This sector has seen a shift towards the

requirement for a degree for entry-level jobs but some of the employers interviewed did not have degrees themselves. Respondents to this study who are now employers but had not been through university indicated that they look for evidence of a degree in the recruitment process and emphasised the functional role of a degree as a means by which an individual's level of skills can be measured.

In contrast to this utilitarian approach, degrees are perceived by academic staff and those working at a policy level as an opportunity for self-transformation:

*'[...] the opportunity to create a kind of new persona, [...] out of which you can present yourself as being highly employable.'*

(Policy Level 3, network  
organisation)

A member of academic staff stated that from the perspective of someone teaching at a 'post-1992' university, a degree from this type of institution can have a transformative effect on students who may have under-estimated their own potential. This resonates with the work of Harvey (2000) who highlights the transformative potential of higher education through enhancing a student's skills, knowledge and orientation as a lifelong learner.

An employer who is a graduate himself emphasised the opportunity to develop fundamental skills through a degree but also highlighted the transformative



potential that such a course can offer particularly in terms of encouraging a more self-sufficient, mature approach which can translate into the workplace.

Another employer perceived university as:

*'[...] a bridge between school and the workplace, and to provide some intellectual and academic growth that will help span that gap.'*

(Employer 13, broadcast  
industry, SME)

A senior manager in a university also highlighted the transformative impact that a university education can bring but broadened this to more holistic benefits and on the impact on society as a whole particularly in the face of the rapid pace of technological change and the need for graduates that can exploit the potential this offers. This perspective is aligned with that of bodies working at a policy level such as Universities UK (2011) that highlight the increased likelihood that a graduate will make a positive contribution to civil society.

One individual working at policy level highlighted that university is an opportunity for personal growth rather than necessarily being about enhancing an individual's potential in the jobs market as this cannot be guaranteed. Two individuals working at a policy level highlighted the continued importance of education for education's sake. This notion is still recognised by the academic staff personally although they perceive that this view is not held by current students. Such an approach to university was not mentioned by students within

the focus groups. An employer commented on how the culture of higher education has changed and lamented the passing of an era when a university experience provided the opportunity to explore possibilities unfettered by the constraints of preparing for graduate employment:

*'[...] it's almost like a rite of passage, which to a certain extent I think has been taken away'.*

(Employer 13, broadcast  
industry, SME)

This perspective resonates with that of Boden and Nedeva (2010) who note that traditionally universities had a looser relationship with the graduate employment market but that this freedom has been lost through state manipulation and the rise of the employability agenda. An academic commented that education for education's sake can be perceived as a luxury that has been superseded by a focus on the competitive advantage that a degree can offer and that the catalyst for this shift in attitude was the changes to the fee structure.

One employer argued for a return to a more obviously two tier system; high end academic universities and universities more focused on vocational courses:

*'[...] in my personal view most universities, whether they realise it or not, are actually selling vocational courses and their product is employable people [...]'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

A level of scepticism was noted amongst academics:

*'We're producing what people call a graduate. Companies now, they say, oh, we need a graduate for this job, and universities, across the board, are producing people that fit what the company wants. Well, is that a real graduate?'*

(Academic Staff 3)

Whilst academic staff supported the notion of self-transformation and some continued to champion the value of education for education's sake, importance was placed on managing student expectations. Though a degree experience can be seen as a rite of passage, the benefits of a university education should not be overplayed to students. The findings of study adds new knowledge through evidence that in the context of this course type students may have unrealistic expectations of the benefits of their degree. The highly competitive environment in which universities now operate can create a conflict of interests: academics are encouraged to 'sell' their courses in a competitive environment but are aware that over-stating the benefits can lead to dissatisfaction and disengagement amongst students:

*'[...] you can't promise a world of work experience for these kids, because basically you'd have to guarantee them, and you're not guaranteeing them a world of work. So what are you guaranteeing them? You're guaranteeing that they're doing something they enjoy, and they achieve a level of learning, and that's it. And that was all it was.'*

(Academic Staff 3)

The findings of this study would indicate that students tend to have a prescriptive view of the purpose of higher education focusing on competitive advantage in terms of securing a job and the potential for enhancement to earnings that comes with having a degree. In the context of Music Technology-oriented programmes, one student perceived a degree as an alternative to an apprenticeship and expected this qualification to offer the potential to start a career at a higher level in a specific role.

Feedback from the survey indicates that students consider the prime purpose of a university education is to develop knowledge in a particular area and this is closely linked to the belief that the experience gained through a degree will enhance their prospects of getting a job, ideally related to the subject area of their degree. Many students highlight the development of skills as a key part of the degree experience. Another important theme was the perception that a degree could enhance earning potential.

**Table 3: Question – What is the Purpose of a University Education? (Distillation of open responses. n = 63 respondents)**

<b>Themes emerging from survey data</b>	<b>Number of References</b>	<b>Comments</b>
'Subject knowledge'	40	
'Enhance job prospects'	37	Of which 23 related to 'Enhance job prospects in a particular area'
'Skills'	19	
'Enhance earning potential'	14	

Overall, in the focus groups current students perceived the purpose of a university education as being a short-cut, a fast track for career development and students said that they undertook degrees in order to obtain competitive advantage in the jobs market. This view echoes the findings of Higgins (2012) who contends that such an instrumental approach to higher education can prevent students from fully embracing the possibilities for personal growth afforded by a degree experience and that this can have a detrimental impact in terms of pursuing fulfilling careers and contributing to the economy.

Students relayed that they believe completing a degree demonstrates commitment to potential employers; however, this was not mentioned by any employers as being important. Perhaps it could be perceived that employers take it for granted that students will complete their degrees and completion is not particularly commendable.

Whilst placements and work experience are widely seen as beneficial to students in terms of enhancing their employability (BIS, 2012), final year student respondents to this study expressed cynicism about the benefits of

higher education borne out of their interactions with industry through placement experiences.

It was apparent that in the context of this type of course, as students develop their knowledge of the sector through their studies and in particular through work experience and industrial placements they become more aware of the wider needs of employers. The onus on transferable skills and the importance of networking can serve to undermine a student's perception of the value of their academic work.

The experience of having undertaken a degree can lead to cynicism: some students' views evolved over the course of the degree and they came to perceive that success is more about who you know rather than what you know although they do concede that universities can facilitate networking. Such cynicism links with the work of Higgins (2012) who noted students' perceptions of nepotism in the graduate jobs market could not be overcome by having a degree:

*'I used to think that, when I came to university, it's to get an edge over everyone else, but from working in industry and getting jobs while I'm here, it's just all down to experience, that I find. It's not really about what you've done at university, it's about who you know, people who've said, you're good, you're not good.'*

(Students 2, final year)

Students do not necessarily perceive the relationship between course material and its relevance in the workplace. One final year student who had previously undertaken a placement stated:

*'I'm almost against university. After having done a year in industry, which wasn't really related to music tech, it's kind of ... uni shows you all these different parts, these different pieces you can go and use in the real world, but it doesn't really go into enough depth ... or it does it in too much detail that it's not really relevant, up to a point, in the actual job.'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-placements)

Having met with graduates, perhaps through placements, current students can be disheartened at the low level, lowly paid positions that graduates can be found to be languishing in years after completing their course.

One final year student respondent to this study felt disengaged upon returning to his final year after having undertaken a placement as he felt obliged to complete university work without *'buying into'* its relevance:

*'You do all this work in university, and it's almost as if you're doing it for the sake of handing in something for someone to mark. Whereas if you're at work, and you're working on something, you have a direct reward, if it's*

*not money, or if it's because ... you're going to boost your position within the company.'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-  
placements)

#### **4.2.1 Implications of Findings**

The tendency of students to have a fairly narrow view of the purpose of an undergraduate programme focusing on the competitive advantage of a particular degree and degree classification may be perceived as understandable when considered in light of the culture of assessment-based gatekeeping that they will have experienced throughout their education to date. A typical student's experience of working towards level 2 and level 3 qualifications is that they act as measurable evidence of ability in a highly prescriptive and competitive context. An academic commented that this target-driven approach can lead students into having a fairly narrow view when entering university. Students have been conditioned into passing various tests and come to university focused on wanting to know what they need to do to pass a module rather than seeing a more holistic view of university as an opportunity to get more widely involved and to be open to various possibilities for learning. This resonates with the findings of Morley (2001) who contended that there is a shift towards a reductive understanding of the purpose of a university education focused on creating work-ready employees.



Perhaps it could be suggested that one of the problems of growing up in such a culture is that 'softer' skills tend not to be formally recognised. Raising awareness of the importance of transferable skills can be difficult without formal recognition:

*'Credentials are the currency of opportunity'*

(Brown, 2003, p.142)

The findings of this study offers new knowledge in terms of presenting evidence which would suggest that students on these courses tend not to place the same emphasis on transferable skills as highlighted by the other stakeholders. This disconnect can be problematic as they may not perceive the value in some of the activities that they may be required to complete as part of their studies. This can lead to disengagement with their course.

Student attitudes are also formed out of their role as consumers of higher education. Individuals may enter university with the perception that such levels of financial investment will offer a recognisable return in terms of an advantage in the employment marketplace.

One academic noted that he has witnessed a shift in student attitudes, perhaps towards taking a more realistic approach to the potential careers that may be borne out of a degree. The 'dream job' for students entering Music Technology-oriented degree courses tends to be that of the studio producer / engineer and

whilst this ambition stills exists, this academic has witnessed that students are now being more pragmatic in their consideration of possible career paths and are more open to a broader range of technology-driven jobs in the wider sector.

The emphasis on collecting evidence of the development of skills as a means of competitive advantage does not necessarily engender an approach whereby students perceive higher education as an opportunity to develop their own graduate identity. Many skills can now be developed through online tools and if students are not supported in the transition into higher education and as they go through their degree courses they may become disillusioned as to the wider benefits of a university education.

One employer highlighted the need for students to take control of their own destiny. He felt that the current education system based on collecting evidence of perceived achievement as a route into a career of choice is not realistic. Furthermore, the realisation that success in the jobs market is not guaranteed, disappointment at the nature of entry-level work and the demands placed on graduates in the workplace can lead to disillusionment.

## 4.3 Perceptions of Employability

### 4.3.1 Defining Graduate Employability

The Literature Review demonstrated that there is no definitive understanding of what is meant by graduate employability (Bennett et al., 1999) and the findings of this study would support this; whilst there are recurring themes across the four different stakeholder groups, differences in emphasis were apparent.

Definitions of employability as ventured by those working at a policy level resonate with widely accepted models. This study found that at a policy level, employability is perceived as a combination of having the appropriate level of knowledge and skills, a positive attitude and ability to adopt appropriate behaviour for the workplace in order for an individual to be worthy of investment by an employer:

*‘Employability skills will enable you to get from where you are to that kind of fully-developed, fully-functional person in the workplace who an employer values, who’s adding value to their business’*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)

Another individual working at policy level interpreted employability as being about personal empowerment. A university education offers the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills and approaches to problem-solving that can *'future-proof'* a graduate as they navigate a career in a highly dynamic business environment. Others working at policy level also highlighted the need for graduates to have developed a skillset for coping with change. This links with the findings of Harvey (2003) in his discussions with employers.

This group of stakeholders also emphasised employability as being about fulfilling the wider needs of society. This framework is closely aligned to the ESECT model (see page 35) which focuses on skills, knowledge and personal characteristics that enhance the likelihood of a graduate securing employment in their career of choice which is of benefit to themselves, the organisation, the community and the wider economy (Yorke, 2006) .

A senior manager in a university highlighted the shift in emphasis towards employability that she had witnessed throughout her career in higher education:

*'It's about the match between the output of the university and what society and business need, and I think that's a change from how it used to be. I don't think there was that relationship before.'*

(Policy Level 8 university  
management)

One individual who works for a network organisation focused on enhancing graduate employability highlighting the need for clarity between employment and employability:

*'I'd want to make a distinction between initial employment and employability. And you can be employable even if there are no jobs, if you see what I mean.'*

(Policy Level 3, network organisation)

Feedback from academics focused on employability being about having a positive attitude, tenacity and strong transferable skills as well as being able to gain an appreciation of the wider industry that they may be looking to enter as graduates. Academics emphasised the importance of students gaining an appreciation of how the knowledge that they have gained through their studies translates into the commercial world. The findings of Pegg et al. (2012) would suggest that this is an area that students often struggle with.

One academic felt strongly that it is the responsibility of the university to be aware of the particular skills required by employers, skills that are not necessarily recognised by applicants to an undergraduate degree:

*'In some ways, I'm proud of having hoodwinked people into coming on to the Music Tech course, and giving them skills they didn't actually realise they wanted, and actually done them a favour.'*

(Academic Staff 1)

Another academic is also the owner of a recording studio and an employer of placement students. His perspective highlighted employability in terms of the importance of graduates being able to demonstrate initiative and the potential for a graduate to contribute and generate income for an organisation as soon as possible.

Employers' interpretations of what is meant by employability tended to focus on the graduate as a resource; what value can a particular individual bring to an organisation? This perspective is borne out of the need for efficiency in terms of being able to choose the best candidate and speed of return on investment.

From the perspective of employers, employability is about work readiness: can a graduate demonstrate the necessary job-specific technical skills as well as the soft skills such as the ability to think through a problem, good time management, resilience, teamwork and interpersonal skills? Are they confident? Can they demonstrate on-going motivation to gain experience? This reflects the findings of Lees (2002) in her review of research into employability.

Echoing the feedback of one of the academics, an employer underlined the importance of graduates marketing themselves to potential employers; employability also being about to what extent a graduate can sell themselves, particularly in an interview situation.

An employer highlighted the importance of interpersonal skills, to the extent that they can be more important than job specific skills:

*'If someone knows absolutely everything, and knows more physics than the guys that are designing the systems, but if they can't talk, they can't socialise, and they don't get on with their co-workers, they're really difficult, [...]. So, he's not necessarily employable if [...] she, he ... has all the skills, but doesn't necessarily have the interpersonal skills that our industry 120% relies on. You need to be able to talk to people.'*

(Employer 9 live events sound specialists)

Another employer highlighted that crucially a graduate needs demonstrable skills that an employer requires. He emphasised that when looking to secure their first graduate job, students have no track record so they need something that makes them stand out, this could be a portfolio of work or a project they have been involved with perhaps. Another employer pursued a similar theme and acknowledged that when recruiting a recent graduate he is looking for evidence that they have been proactive in gaining extracurricular experience.

Echoing the findings of Lowden et al. (2011), graduate employability is also about the perceived quality of the course that the students have been studying as well as the graduate's performance on their course. Employers are aware of the reputation of particular courses and how this relates to the potential employability of graduates. One academic commented that the reputations of particular courses as interpreted by employers are built over many years:

*'[...] it gets to the point where you're actually more mature in how the industry views you. You know, there were certain companies that didn't regard our students as suitable for them. They particularly wanted electronics students, and now they've had a few of our students, [...] they have placement students, they employ our graduates, and it snowballs.'*

(Academic Staff 1)

The findings of this study would suggest that students can have a fairly narrow view as to what is meant by employability in the context of higher education: perceiving a degree as a means to an end in terms of demonstrating a level of ability in order to succeed in securing employment. Students tended to interpret graduate employability as the extent to which a degree makes an individual more attractive as a potential employee; the competitive advantage that comes with such a qualification. In their feedback, some students also saw employability as the perceived value of a graduate to an employer; how appealing a graduate is to an employer based on their academic results.



In survey feedback, the most common response from students to the open question 'What do you understand by 'graduate employability?' was that employability was about 'how employable a graduate is'. Some students elaborated on this by emphasising the importance of course-related knowledge and to a lesser extent, skills and ability. A small number highlighted transferable skills.

For many of the student respondents to this study, employability is simply about how successful graduates are in terms of finding a job. Some referred to general job availability and the ease of securing employment upon completion of a degree course. A few students considered employability to be about the ease of translation of degree knowledge into the context of the workplace.

#### **4.3.1.1 Implications of Findings**

The inconsistency between students' perceptions of employability and those of employers was highlighted by Tibby (2012). This theory resonates with the findings of this study which indicate that students have a limited interpretation of employability. This disconnect is important because those graduates that do not appreciate the needs of employers are at a disadvantage in the graduate jobs market. Crucially, employers are looking for graduates that can demonstrate initiative and motivation above and beyond the requirements of a degree course. Students that perceive the degree as enough in itself to secure course-related graduate employment may miss out on opportunities to enhance

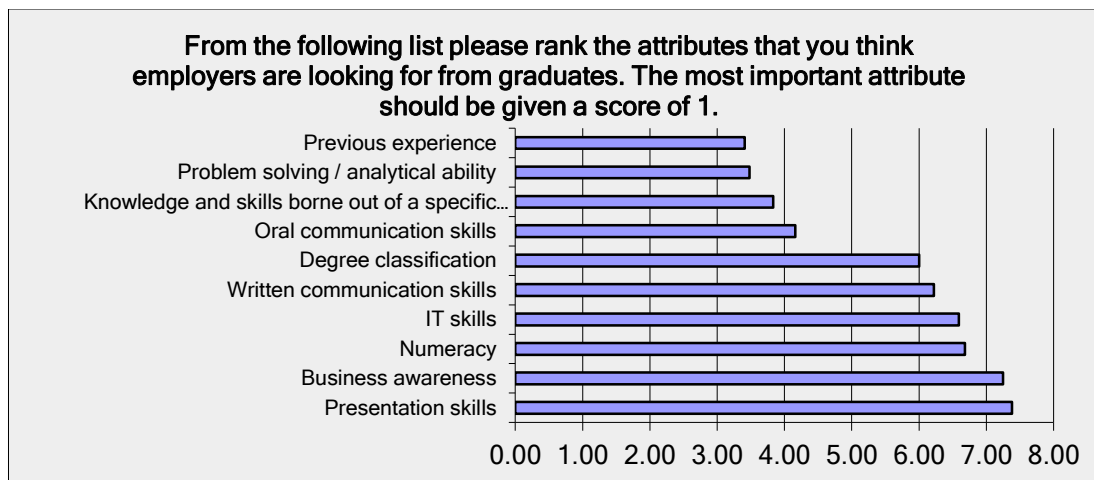
their profiles in terms of employability through engagement in extracurricular activities, work experience and placements. The findings of this study would also suggest that students do not necessarily appreciate the importance of interpersonal skills and in particular the ability to demonstrate that they can work as part of a team.

#### **4.3.2 What Attributes do Employers want from Graduates?**

The review of literature found that whilst employer requirements for transferable skills were ubiquitous, there was a lack of clarity beyond the generic (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2009). Analysis of data collected for this study demonstrated that there was general agreement across the 4 stakeholder groups as to what attributes employers require from graduates and this broadly reflects the findings of the CBI (2009b) which focused on: self-management; team working; business and customer awareness; problem solving; communication and literacy; numeracy; applied information technology. However, the findings of this study echoed the lack of precision highlighted in the literature review and there were variances in emphasis across the stakeholder groups.

As part of the survey, students were asked 'What evidence of skills / knowledge do you think employers want from graduates?' Respondents were invited to rank attributes from a given list. The most important attribute was to be given a score of 1.

**Figure 8: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'What evidence of skills / knowledge do you think employers want from graduates?' (n = 63 respondents)**



Survey feedback from students indicated that the respondents perceived previous experience to be the main priority for employers; this was mentioned in one discussion with an individual working at a policy level and was also highlighted in discussions with employers.

One employer saw a degree as peripheral and is keen to explore evidence of career-related extra-curricular activity when considering a graduate:

*'I suppose the degree qualification doesn't do any harm [...] I can think of someone here who could have quite easily found themselves in their role, as I did, without having done a degree, but they have. And I can't think there's very much to separate them from people who are sitting alongside them who didn't. Did they take the same sort of time whilst they were at uni to still continue their interests outside of the course? Were they still working*

*in theatres, finding the jobs that took them beyond their course modules?  
Was that degree related to what they're currently doing? I don't think  
there's a great number of people that I work with in here that have done  
degrees, or indeed, done degrees which have been in subjects related to  
what they do. Maybe loosely.'*

(Employer 2, corporate live  
events)

This view reflects the findings of Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) that personal traits are a key focus for employers. One of the respondents to their study from a third sector arts organisation also highlighted that when recruiting they were looking for evidence that the graduate had embraced a range of extra-curricular activities whilst at university as well as indications that they have a genuine interest in their course of study beyond just passing assessments.

Previous experience was not mentioned in discussions with academics regarding the requirements of employers however. In wider discussions, whilst academics typically acknowledge the benefits of students gaining work experience and work placements in particular, this is not necessarily a key focus for an academic. Supporting students in the pursuance of such work-based learning is resource-intensive and whilst course marketing typically highlights the availability of such internships, student respondents spoke of frustration with the lack of support for such opportunities once on the course. Such

unfulfilled expectations can lead to disenchantment amongst students and may be an issue for employers when considering job applications.

Respondents to the student survey envisaged employers placing a high value on problem solving/analytical ability and this resonates with the science focus at the heart of BSc Music Technology-oriented courses. Problem solving / analytical ability was mentioned twice in discussions with individuals working at a policy level.

The third highest statement was 'Knowledge and skills borne out of a specific degree'. There was unanimity across the stakeholder groups around the importance of subject knowledge. Four employers highlighted the need for evidence of the 'knowledge of subject fundamentals' with another referring to a broader 'subject knowledge'.

Overall, individuals working at a policy level referred to the importance of technical skills (two references), subject knowledge (one reference) and in-depth subject knowledge (one reference).

What employers mean when they say that they are looking for specific attributes such as technical skills can be ambiguous. A senior manager in a university commented that she can carried out some research across Europe exploring what employers required from graduates. Her findings indicated that although employers stated that they required graduates with particular

technical skills what they were really seeking were adaptable graduates who could learn to use new technology quickly. This sentiment was echoed in a response from an academic:

*'Learn how to learn. That's all they're interested in. If you know how to learn, you're OK. Many technical skills will be defunct.'*

(Academic Staff 3)

This sentiment reflects the findings of Harvey (2003) who found that:

*'Employers do not want graduates trained for a job, not least because jobs change rapidly.'*

(Harvey, 2003, p.6)

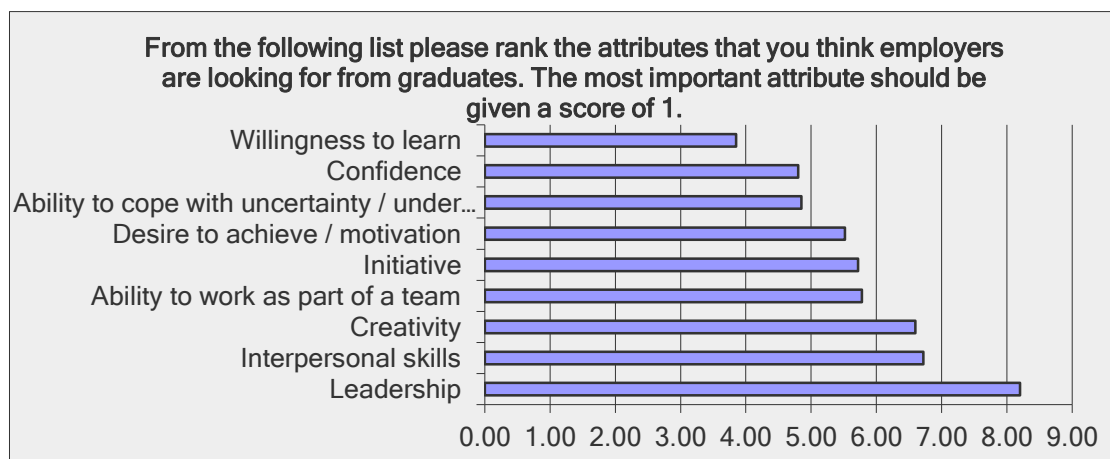
Students tend to focus on learning to use specific software or hardware and the distinction between training and higher level learning needs to be made clear to students: the onus should be on developing skills that will allow them to transfer skills as technology evolves.

In the student survey for this study, oral communication skills and written communication skills were perceived to be the fourth and sixth most important attributes for employers respectively. Employer respondents to this study highlighted the importance of communication skills and this reflects the findings of Universities UK (2011b) which noted that 86% of employers

considered strong communication skills to be important. Communication skills were also highlighted by academics and those working at policy level. The findings of the survey indicates that there may be a disconnect between the requirements of employers, areas of the curriculum related to transferable skills and the perceptions of students. If students do not perceive the value of such skills they may become disengaged with the learning.

As part of the survey, students were also asked, ‘What personal attributes do you think employers want from graduates?’ Respondents were invited to rank the attributes from a given list. The most important attribute was to be given a score of 1.

**Figure 9: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: ‘What personal attributes do you think employers want from graduates?’ (n = 60 respondents)**



Students placed an emphasis on a willingness to learn, confidence and the ability to cope with uncertainty/under pressure as the key personal attributes sought by employers. An academic commented:

*'I think it's just the basics of a willingness to learn, adapt ... teamwork, to work to deadlines, to get things done.'*

(Academic Staff 2)

Echoing the sentiments of students, employers highlighted the importance of confidence and motivation, both for the job itself and for continued personal development. Employers also focused on resourcefulness, dependability and resilience.

A final year student at another university who had previously been on a placement year commented:

*'[...] active graduates that know what they want to do, and are full of ideas. I think that's the most important thing, being active, and always going forward [...].'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-placements)

Initiative is an important factor raised by academics, employers, students surveyed and those working at a policy level.



The ability to work as part of a team was highlighted as a key issue by those working at a policy level, employers and academics:

*'One of the recent demands that has been rising in prominence over the last decade, and that is the nature of teamwork as opposed to individual endeavour.'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

The ability to work as part of a team was ranked as 6 out of 9 in the student survey and can be seen to be perceived as comparatively less important by students as were interpersonal skills. Typically students experience working in teams as part of their studies but it may be that they do not perceive how this translates into the context of the workplace. Again, students' experience of a highly competitive education environment based on individual achievement does not necessarily align with activities at university that are designed to develop the attributes of a team player and that emphasise interpersonal skills.

One academic expressed reservations about the ubiquity of the requirement for 'team-players':

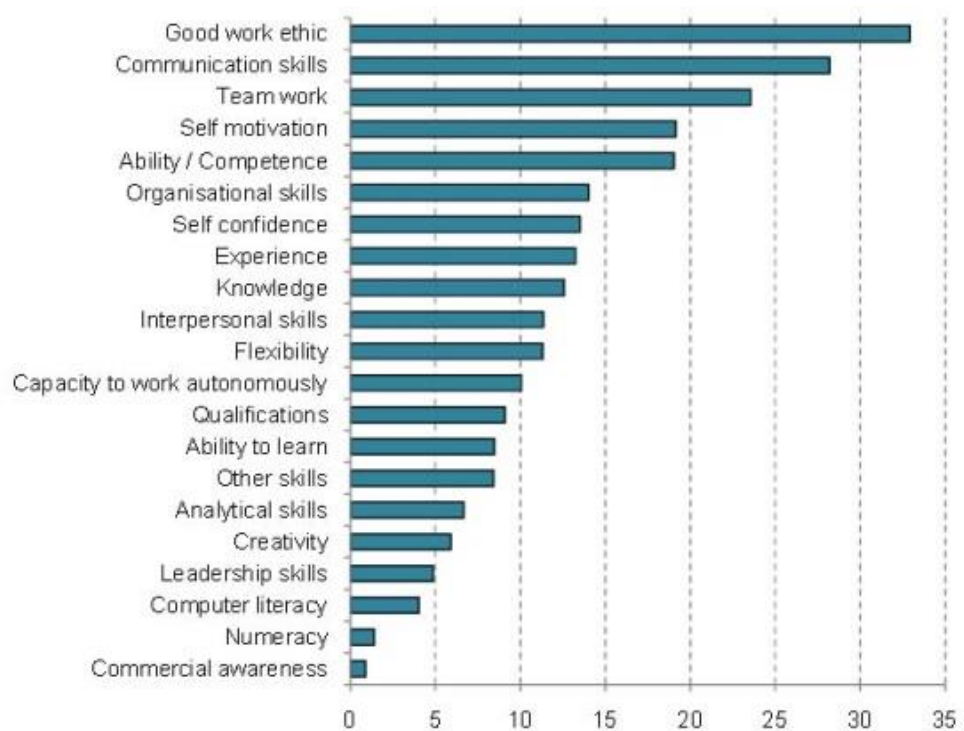
*'I've got friends who employ graduate engineers, and they get pissed off when Personnel says, oh, we want team working. One of the guys goes mad about it, because the engineers he is responsible for never work in a team.'*

*They actually never see anybody. They're out on their own. So why do you need team working? He gives them the job, off they go and they do it, they come back, and he gives them the next job.'*

(Academic Staff 3)

Survey data collected from students for this study can be compared to that from a survey of final year students in 2006 as part of the Futuretrack study (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Skills and Attributes Students Think Employers Look for in Recruiting Graduates. (Atfield and Purcell, 2010, p.13)**



Whilst there are differences in the wording of the options across both surveys and the survey for this study has been split into skills/knowledge and personal attributes, it is possible to compare trends across the data sets. Feedback from both surveys would suggest that the students in both groups placed a similarly low emphasis on the importance of:

- IT skills Computer literacy;
- numeracy;
- business awareness/commercial awareness.

Across both surveys students also seemed to have a fairly low opinion of the importance of the following two aspects:

- creativity;
- leadership/leadership skills.

Having experienced a lifetime of the education system perhaps students take numeracy for granted. Similarly, students grow up using computers and may feel confident in use of various applications. Students on BSc Music Technology-oriented courses develop their interest in the subject via the use of a variety of computer software and tend to have extensive experience of music-based computer programmes.

Students' perceptions as to the relatively low importance of business awareness and leadership skills is indicative of a disconnect between the perceptions of students and the other 3 other stakeholder groups. A consequence of this might be that students do not perceive the relevance of industry/professional skills-related modules that are typically part of the structure of Music Technology-oriented degrees.

In contrast to the comparatively low perception by students of the importance of creativity to employers an academic highlighted the importance of employers seeking graduates that can demonstrate creative flair. Whilst the exploration of science and technology is fundamental to BSc Music Technology-oriented degree courses, the teaching tends to encourage creativity:

*'I think to employers, those sorts of things illustrate that the student can think outside the box, which makes them slightly more employable than perhaps people who've only learnt the software, and are basically just a technician who's never tried to do anything else, because I think companies who want to have the cutting edge over other companies need individuals who can do that thinking outside the box, who can do more unusual things, and can work with things perhaps in a non-traditional matter.'*

(Academic Staff 2)

The undervaluing of creativity by students may lead to a dismissive attitude to a key element of BSc Music Technology-oriented degree programmes and a valuable attribute for employers.

One student thought that employers may base their recruitment, to some extent, on the credibility of particular courses/universities:

*'I think it comes down to three things. Your project, the university you went to, and your result. [...]. I think a lot of it's the university you went to, because ... imagine, your employer's got thousands of people to look through for a job nowadays, and they just pick out, [...] places that, like, they know, or top-rated universities [...].'*

(Students 2, final year)

This sentiment resonates with the findings of Morley (2001) who noted that the employers tend to favour elite universities.

Feedback for this study indicates that the priority for employers would seem to be communication skills and to a lesser extent interpersonal skills, the ability to present ideas or an argument and the ability to work as part of a team.

Intrepreneurial/entrepreneurial potential was mentioned once by those working at a policy level, employers and an academic who is also the owner of a recording studio and as such an employer.

Employers highlighted the importance of such 'softer' skills. An employer stated:

*'They're not to be underestimated, soft skills. I think there's a lot of people of people out there who get further in life on just soft skills and not much else'*

(Employer 6, audio products specialists)

One employer noted that the management philosophy within an organisation guides the personality traits being sought by employers. The profile of the 'ideal' graduate varies depending on the management style within the company. He contended that a more autocratic manager may wish to employ obedient staff that can follow instructions. Conversely, employers with a more democratic leadership style may be looking for self-motivated, independent graduate recruits.

The findings of this study resonate with the outcomes highlighted by Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011): attitudes and requirements may differ depending on the size and nature of the organisation. One individual working at a policy level for a network organisation argued that employer requirements vary depending on the size and culture of the organisation. In his experience common traits appeared in the requirements of third sector employers and SMEs, in particular the importance of cultural fit over evidence of academic performance.

The ability to ‘add value’ to an organisation was emphasised by 3 employers but this issue was not reflected in feedback from academics, those working at policy level or students. This underpins the employer view of investing in graduates as a resource for which they need to see a return on investment. One employer commented:

*‘It’s simple, it’s much simpler than people think. Value add, yeah? [...] if you want to get a salary of 20,000 you need to make that company or save them at least 60, yeah? The only reason a job exists in the first place is because that person adds value or saves time from someone else. If people realise that that will change the whole mindset towards employment. [...] You have to make the money or save the money for the company. Or facilitate the saving or making of money. [...]*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

Another of the employer respondents echoed the importance of seeing a return on investment in a graduate recruit and added that recruiters want graduates that are self-motivated, forward-looking and can recognise emerging business trends. An employer argued that employers should not be complacent and that they need to proactively nurture emerging talent. This may involve offering work experience and training alongside a student’s academic work.

An employer spoke of how he had witnessed the broadcast sector change over the last 20 years; from taking on graduates from a broad range of courses and training them within the organisation towards a strategy of selecting graduates from more specifically vocational degrees. Part of the reason given for this is the growth of specialisation in this sector:

*'[...]now all the technology in different areas is so advanced that nobody can have the full range of skills, so that sort of all-rounder role doesn't really exist in the same way, or not at the same level, and we need people with increased specialisations in specific areas [...].'*

(Employer 12, broadcast  
industry, national  
broadcaster)

This particular employer has experience of working for a national television broadcaster in the development of degree courses and again contended that this was further evidence of technology-driven change requiring evermore highly specialised staff.

An employer from an audio products manufacturer has also witnessed an increase in the demand for evermore specialised skills from recruiters in this sector:



*'For example, they might ask for embedded systems, or embedded audio skills, or operating skills, or full knowledge and understanding of digital filtering, for example. [...]*

*Whereas, say, 10 years ago, it was much more of a, right, have you got a first class student? Have you got a 2i student? Across the board in this subject area. So it's much more specific skill-focused now, I feel.'*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

There can be perceived to be a dichotomy between students' perceptions of an industry and reality. One employer from a company that specialises in entertainment technology solutions emphasised the need for students to spend time in a particular professional environment in order to appreciate the reality of possible career paths. In the context of this highly specialised sector new recruits can have unrealistic expectations of their potential to obtain roles that are currently monopolised by a very small number of highly experienced individuals.

In the 'hard sell' of vocational courses students can be deflated by the reality of their level of entry into an organisation and their potential career progression. Another employer highlighted the importance of managing expectations:

*'[...] I think university should be representative the real-world and is not at all. We have to spend the first few months giving people a good kicking, figuratively, to make them understand what work is about. Actually no we don't we don't employ those people in the first place, we don't have time for it.'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

Employers can hold pre-conceptions when considering graduate recruits. An employer in the television broadcast industry noted that:

*'[...] certainly in @@a major UK broadcaster##, there was almost a stigma attached to graduates coming in. You know, it was, you were over-qualified, or you were sort of head in the clouds, or something like that.'*

(Employer 13, broadcast  
industry, SME)

An employer working for an audio company also spoke of negative stereotypes attributed to graduates: typically that they have academic knowledge but lack common sense. He went on to add that this issue was less prevalent as the standard of graduates has improved.

One of the findings of Hinchliffe and Jolly's study (2011) was that 75% of employer respondents highlighted the importance of diversity awareness; this issue was not raised by any of the employers for this study.

Feedback gathered from academics for this piece of research as to the attributes employers require from graduates tends to focus on subject knowledge, team work, communication skills, initiative and a positive attitude, all of which would support notions of a committed student regardless of any rationale to enhance graduate employability:

*'The business of recording studios, live sound, radio, TV, taking on people on no pay is actually a test [...] of people's character and their commitment to the job, and also, what they're wanting to do is test how people fit in, and how people get on with people. Because they don't really care about your technical skills [...] they're worried about how you're going to talk to clients, how you're going to behave.'*

(Academic Staff 1)

This sentiment was echoed in the feedback of employers who tended to focus on initiative, reliability and resilience and to a lesser extent a positive attitude: a 'can do' approach, ability to perform under pressure, confidence, self-development, motivation and passion:

*'... you can teach skills, and actually the time and effort spent and invested in teaching people is well worth it if they come with the right attitude. So it's about how people demonstrate their attitude in the interview, which makes them employable for me, and less about their qualification.'*

(Employer 2, corporate live events)

This focus on graduates having a positive attitude reflects feedback from the CBI as referred to in the findings of Lowden et al., (2011) who noted the importance of drive and openness to new ideas.

Those working at a policy level covered the most areas in terms of their interpretation of the personal traits required by employers. The following areas emerged: a positive attitude, a 'can do' approach and motivation. To a lesser extent the following traits were highlighted: commitment, confidence, cultural fit, drive/energy/enthusiasm, self-development, good work ethic, initiative, resilience and responsibility. A senior manager in a university highlighted the importance of leadership:

*'[...] the ability to have a vision, the ability to articulate a view, the ability to be able to influence others, and negotiate, and be resilient'*

(Policy Level 7 university management)

Respondents working at a policy level highlighted that employers are not always good at articulating what they want from graduates. Such ambiguities resonate with the findings of Teichler (1998). This lack of clarity is not helpful to university course teams having to make decisions as to how to frame their teaching.

Senior managers at two universities highlighted the importance of critical self-reflection. One of the managers offered the following overview of employer requirements:

*'They want work ethic. They want communication skills. They want, increasingly, IT technology skills. They want ability to think. They want ability to write. There is a subset of things they want which are to do with the discipline and the organisation, but it's mostly about self-reflection, self-responsibility, a wide view of the world, ability to deal with data, to argue.'*

(Policy Level 8 university  
management)

Respondents to this study working at policy level relayed positive feedback from employers regarding the employability of graduates but acknowledge that this is a dynamic situation as the needs of employers evolve in response to technology-driven change:

*'We do two big employer surveys, [...] 84% of employers are happy or very happy with the graduates they recruit. Where employers aren't as happy, it's not usually about things like literacy and numeracy; it's about a lack of awareness of work, a lack of work experience [...]*

*'What kind of skills did you find people were missing?' And the one that comes top is technical skills, as you'd imagine. And then after that it's things like the right attitude, and then quite a long way down is literacy and numeracy.'*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)

Another individual working at policy level highlighted issues with regard to employers not being able to clearly articulate their needs and the tendency to be unrealistic in their demands. This reflects the findings of Harvey (2003): employers often seek graduates that require little training in order to carry out their specific job role and this approach is unrealistic. This impatience from employers echoes the findings of the CBI (2011b).

#### **4.3.2.1 Implications of Findings**

Whilst established theory suggests that there is a lack of clarity in terms of the attributes employers require when recruiting graduates (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2009), evidence gathered through this research offers new insight into the

narrow perceptions expressed by students studying Music Technology-oriented degree courses when compared to feedback from those working at a policy level, academic staff and employers.

Overall, the findings of this study would suggest that students do not necessarily appreciate employer requirements, particularly with regard to softer skills and moreover, may not buy-into aspects of the degree curriculum designed to enhance these skills. Students need to be aware of the importance of learning to learn, teamwork, creativity and leadership skills. In terms of business awareness, students should appreciate their role as an expensive human resource when entering the graduate jobs market and to have a greater appreciation of the perspectives of employers. Students also need to be aware of the importance of extracurricular activities that will impress potential employers. In order to maximise the potential for students to gain work based learning as part of their degree experience, universities need to invest in human resources to support the growing requirement for outward-facing engagement.

Employers should clearly articulate their requirements and be more proactive in their involvement with students and universities in order to influence course development and nurture potential graduate recruits. Whilst employer requirements are borne out of the fast pace of technological change, higher education is also a highly dynamic environment and employers need to be aware of the changes that are taking place in terms of course design and delivery across the sector. In order to fulfil their needs for specific skillsets they

should not simply rely on recruiting from elite universities as a pre-filtering strategy, rather they should consider the wider graduate pool and not be constrained by historical biases and stereotypes of students.

Students require a mature approach to navigating through a highly specialised, technology-focused and dynamic business environment. Students would benefit from a greater appreciation of the reality of career development in the particular sector they are looking to pursue. HEIs need to carefully manage student and graduate expectations both in relation to course content and approach to delivery but also in terms of the realities of career progression. The 'Precarious Workers Brigade and Carrot Workers Collective' highlight the dangers of universities over-selling their industry links, placement opportunities and under-playing issues around low pay:

*'The school and the university, rather than protecting their students take up the role of gatekeepers for accessing job placements and brokers of talent for major corporate interests that, in turn, can offer donations and lend brand credibility to the expensive courses on offer. The experience of free labour, narrated as job placements, is often written into the curriculum of very expensive graduate and postgraduate courses. [...] Increasingly, a job appears as something you buy, and the monopoly seems to be in the hands of education providers.'*



(Precarious Workers Brigade  
and Carrot Workers Collective,  
2014, p.219)

In such a dynamic environment it is crucial that academics find ways to have ongoing, continuous dialogue with industrial partners in order to fully appreciate the attributes that employers are looking for when recruiting graduates. The balance between developing a breadth of skills and appreciating the specific technology-driven expertise required by industry can inform innovative course design.

#### **4.3.3 The Prominence of Employability in Higher Education**

In line with the findings of Pegg et al. (2012), the consensus of opinion across employers, academics and at a policy level as captured for this study was that employability is more prominent now than in the past.

Historically, a degree could be seen as evidence of belonging to the educated elite but following the massification of higher education in the UK the role of the degree as a differentiator has been eroded (Brown, 2003). In line with the findings of Branine (2008), one employer noted that a degree is now a prerequisite for many roles when previously this level of qualification was not a requirement. In an era where more people have degrees, attributes related to employability can be a means of differentiation for students and employers:

*'I think perhaps more people go to university now, and a lot of the CVs that I look at are the same, and other ways to measure employability are useful, I think.'*

(Employer 3, audio products  
manufacturer)

Reflecting the findings of Collins (1994), employers expressed concerns over the perceived devaluing of higher education as numbers undertaking degrees has grown. Another employer, a graduate himself, has witnessed the emergence of the Masters degree as a means of standing out in a jobs market saturated with first degree graduates. He also felt that undertaking a placement was not necessarily enough to demonstrate potential and that extended periods of work experience may also now be required.

Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2011) highlight 'objective' and 'subjective' graduate under-employment. Objective under-employment is based on notions of generally accepted standards, whereas subject under-employment is based on the graduate's own interpretation of their employment status. One of the employers interviewed for this study could be said to be considering graduate employment from an objective perspective when he talked of a graduate working in retail as an indication of under-employment.

Another employer expressed cynicism at the 'dumbing down' of higher education. In previous eras individuals that went to university were the

academic elite (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) and this employer contended that the notion of academic excellence has been sold back to all parents that their children can be part of this elite. He is now of the opinion that parents of his generation (he is in his early 30s) who have been through university in the period of rapid expansion have reservations around the credibility of such a system and in the light of the current levels of student debt are not necessarily buying-into the aspiration that their children should go to university.

An academic also considered the influence of politically-driven changes within higher education and how this has influenced the current focus in this area. He reflected on the levels of interaction between employers and HEIs which had been well established within polytechnics. He felt strongly that the rise in prominence of employability across the sector in recent years was welcomed as without it going to university:

*'[...] just becomes that rite of passage where you just do it for the sake of doing it, and, as I say, I think that's fine, but I don't think people have the time or the money to afford that sort of luxury anymore.'*

(Academic Staff 2)

Echoing the findings of QAA (2014), increases in the level of fees is seen as a catalyst for the rise in prominence of employability. An employer commented that the level of debt that graduates are now incurring means that they need to perceive the potential for a return on investment and to have confidence in

their abilities to earn enough to clear the debt they will have amassed as a student.

Those working at a policy level and employers also recognised that changes in the fee structure has the effect of greater emphasis on employability: parents and students alike are looking for evidence of the benefits of undertaking an undergraduate degree course:

*'Well, there is the fact that the fees have gone up, so focusing on employability makes absolute sense from a higher educational point of view, because you need to prove that this degree has value, and that there are jobs available at the outcome.'*

(Employer 6, audio products specialists)

Employers highlighted the increased competition between universities borne out of the need to draw-in customers by demonstrating the benefits in terms of career and earning potential that a degree can bring and how this feeds into university marketing campaigns:

*'[...] if my son does this course at university, as his parent, what are his chances of getting a job at the end of it? [...] So I think it's now, universities have got to sell, sell, sell. I think that's the thing..'*

(Employer 1, live events  
sound specialists)

Evidence of convergence in the views of employers and students were captured illustrating the debate around the investment required to complete a degree or the alternative route of starting a career sooner:

*'I think it's still changing. [...] if you go to university, you gain a degree, [...] I truly believe that you have got more chance of employment, but there are lots of people who are questioning that, and they're saying, well, what if I get 4 years of hard experience, other than the degree? You know, how do they stack up against each other?'*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

This attitude was echoed by a student in the survey feedback:

*'For some people, a university education has been made to represent a clear advantage in employability over a candidate without university education. As this is not the case, with an interest in fees, it may not seem as worthwhile as starting to work in the industry 3/4 years earlier and "working your way up" in a more traditional sense.'*

An employer/academic highlighted the role of the mass media in influencing the employability agenda:

*'[...] it's quite popular to say how many people are unemployed at the moment, because it provokes a reaction. So I do think off the back of that, a lot more people are aware that there's not enough jobs out there for students. So I do think it's much more widespread, the knowledge that students aren't getting jobs, and the fact they're coming out of university with... what is it? 25, 30 grand debt, just for student fees? That's a lot of money. They deserve jobs.'*

(Employer 9, live events  
sound specialists)

In the survey, students were asked if they thought that the rise in prominence of graduate employability is linked to increases in the cost of course fees, the results were fairly evenly spread with 30.2% saying yes, 34% no and 35.8% 'don't know'. In terms of the comments that were added to support this feedback, students' views broadly aligned with that of employers, academics and those working at policy level with various comments alluding to increased fees and debt increasing the focus on the potential return on investment. One student had an alternative view though:

*'I don't think they're related at all. The increase in course fees doesn't necessarily mean greater employability - it is merely down to university*

*finances and budgeting. If money doesn't stretch far enough, fees will rise.*

*That doesn't mean the course has necessarily improved.'*

An individual working at a policy level went on to consider the impact of the wider economy and globalisation. He highlighted that a 'job for life' is no longer a realistic prospect and emphasised the impact of globalisation and the ease with which employers can recruit from global labour markets. This echoes the findings of Hesketh (2003) who highlighted the pressure that this puts on graduates:

*'In the new global, knowledge-driven economy you have to run just to stand still.'*

(Hesketh, 2003, p.3)

Another employer highlighted the effect of instant global communication and the way in which social media can serve to sensationalise issues and give misleading impressions of the socio-political environment. Whilst political parties may be working to agendas based on manipulating voter impressions of good governance over 5 years between general election cycles, universities should consider the wider agenda. As part of this long term world view the enhancement of employability is a key aspect of developing graduates that can compete in a global jobs market.

In the face of such market forces, employability can be perceived as an aspect of personal development that can be enhanced to offer some security to individuals in a turbulent jobs market:

*'An increasing awareness of the fragility ... or the rapidity of change in the employment world, which makes it more a more fragile world, and also means that the guidance that parents used to be able to offer about what was perceived as a relatively stable set of employment opportunities, and hierarchies, no longer applies even for those parents who are in traditional stable contexts. Those are subject to change without a great deal of notice. So it's a much more unpredictable labour market, which makes it more scary.'*

(Policy Level 3, network  
organisation)

An employer also highlighted the impact of globalisation in terms of the opportunities for graduates to seek employment overseas if there are insufficient numbers of jobs for graduates in the UK.

Students were posed the question, 'It has been suggested that the focus on the development of graduate employability is related to the current economic climate. Do you think that graduate employability will have such prominence in Higher Education in an improved economic climate where the demand for graduates outstrips the supply?'. Findings from the student survey were split:



22.6% agreed with the statement, 37.7% disagreed and 39.6% didn't know.

In the verbatim comments some students argued that a focus on graduate employability will remain even in an improved economic climate as there will continue to be too many graduates coming through the system and the need for differentiation through demonstrable employability will continue.

Other students felt that the importance of enhancing graduate employability transcended any current economic climate as high levels of competition for graduate jobs will continue. This was perceived as particularly pertinent for those seeking careers borne out of BSc Music Technology-oriented degrees. One student stated:

*'I feel in an industry like music the supply of graduates seeking employment will always outweigh the demand [...].'*

Another student commented:

*'I don't think this will ever happen in this field. I think it will always be a tough and cut-throat sector in terms of finding employment - I can't imagine the demand will ever overrun the number of graduates. However, if demand ever did outstrip supply then I believe graduate employability would become less of an issue and therefore definitely lose prominence. If an employer need employees, then they need employees - business growth*

*can't just be allowed to grind to a halt. I think this would just cause the employability threshold to lower.'*

Of the students that contended that the current onus on universities to focus on employability may be seen to be reduced in an improved economic climate one stated:

*'Employability is generally an issue brought to light when graduates are not getting employed.'*

From the perspective of one of the employers interviewed for this study, in difficult economic times evidence of employability can be seen as a crucial differentiator.

An employer was of the opinion that the current focus on employability will not disappear in better economic times as there has been a permanent cultural shift. Another stated:

*'[...] from an employer's point of view, I'm always going to be looking for the employability factor of the graduate, regardless of the climate. A healthier climate promotes ... you know, there's an opportunity for growth, so you do need the employability factor from the graduate in order to then say, you know, we can exploit these markets now'*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

Another employer thought that employability will drop-off the agenda but that this should not be the case as the importance of the development of such skills transcends any particular prevailing economic climate.

A university manager noted that research has shown that education and the economy operate in quite different cycles; when the economy is weak; more people tend to go to university.

Employers highlighted the importance of considering the wider economic context and the need for long-term planning. Companies require a balanced workforce with a range of skills and abilities. Employers need to consider the future development of their organisations and how this impacts on recruitment. Wider society needs to consider:

*'[...] where is the profile of employment going, and do we actually stop people going to university, or do we educate them in a different way, and do we formulate this sort of cross-section of people that can fulfil all the demand? It's no good having a bunch of mathematicians and no road diggers, because you can't get the roads [...]*

(Employer 10, specialist  
support for live events)

One employer argued that whilst all organisations are subject to changes in the economy the rapid pace of change in the technology sector and the need for greater specialisation is such that generic changes to education will not necessarily resonate with companies at the forefront of technology-driven change.

A senior manager in a university highlighted the difficulties faced by universities as they reappraise their offer in light of political, social and technological change. She highlighted the tension between HEIs pursuing differentiation in a highly competitive environment and yet being constrained by the regulation that comes with university status:

*'[...] we're getting less money from the government, and yet we're being tested and monitored even more than we ever did.'*

(Policy Level 8, university  
management)

An employer also commented on the constraints placed on universities as they are required to respond to wider policies borne out of political agendas. In the interviews, respondents were asked if they thought that there was any link between the abandonment of the target of 50% of young people going to university, the current state of the economy and the rise of the graduate employability agenda. An individual working at a policy level suggested that

although the economy does not necessarily require 50% of young people to have degrees there are wider benefits to society as:

*'[...] graduate status is associated with lower levels of crime, lower levels of demand on the healthcare system. You can make a social case for a high graduate population, for giving a number of social benefits.'*

(Policy Level 3, network  
organisation)

A senior manager in an HEI considered the changes that she had witnessed within higher education and argued that in the move from an elitist system towards the massification of higher education, the total focus on the student experience that she enjoyed when at university has been replaced by students having to balance their studies against work commitments in the face of financial pressures. This is in line with the findings of Leese (2010) who found in her study of students at a post-1992 university that 70% had part time jobs. The senior university manager interviewed for this study went on to note that whilst more flexible programmes need to be created to support such students changes over recent years has seen the decline of part-time and mature student numbers.

#### **4.3.3.1 Implications of Findings**

Data collected for this study would suggest that as higher education has evolved from provision for the academic elite towards mass delivery, graduate employability has risen in prominence as a means of differentiation in a highly competitive graduate market.

As noted, one of the responses from an employer suggests that Masters degrees could be perceived as superseding undergraduate degrees as one strategy for filtering-off the academic elite. This has huge implications in terms of the potential for further debt to be incurred by students, loss of earnings for the period when a graduate may have gone straight into employment and may also have implications in terms of widening participation. The extra cost of a Masters degree may be something that students from less well-off families may struggle to reconcile.

Employers do not necessarily perceive the employability agenda solely from the perspective of purchasers of graduate talent; they are often parents themselves and are having to carefully consider the value of such an experience for their own children. This study would indicate that perceptions of higher education are evolving. As those that came through university in the period of massification are now having their own children they are not necessarily buying-in to the perception of a degree as a means of securing higher-earning, fulfilling careers. Their own experience of higher education and perhaps the

limited advantages that such an experience has given them, may serve to undermine the perceived value of a degree for future generations.

The importance of the impact of the increase in fees is evident from data collected from all stakeholders for this study. The change in fee structure has influenced how universities develop and position their courses in a highly competitive environment. It is forcing universities to consider their approaches to engagement with industry as a means of demonstrating employer engagement. The findings of this study would suggest that the level of investment required in order to pursue higher education has changed the perceptions of students.

The findings also demonstrate the tension within academia as universities struggle to adapt to a highly dynamic environment. Although recent decades have seen the rise of the market economy across higher education, university managers are constrained by regulation as they endeavour to respond and adapt to market forces and changes to the regulations under which they operate.

Whilst the impact of the national economy is felt by graduates and may influence the extent to which employability is perceived to be important, the rise of globalisation is such that students need to embrace the importance of enhancing their employability regardless of the vagaries of the current state of their national economy.

This study offers new evidence on the perspectives of key stakeholder groups on the prominence of employability in higher education in the context of a particular course type. Music Technology-oriented courses can be considered a niche subject area and support a diverse and highly specialised jobs markets. The jobs market for graduates from BSc Music Technology-oriented degrees has always been highly competitive. The importance of gaining experience and enhancing employability profiles is something that students from such courses may more easily embrace than students from other courses. Moreover, in such a competitive environment, employability can also be seen as an aspect of personal development that individuals can have some control over, irrespective of their levels of academic achievement.

The employability agenda has risen in prominence as the levels of part time employment undertaken by students has increased. As students are gaining more experience of the workplace through their part time work, which may enhance their overall employability, the lack of flexibility and increases in fees have seen the fall in part time study and the numbers of mature students.

Figures from the Independent Commission on Fees indicate that:

*'Since 2009/10 there has been a 48.4% drop in part-time student numbers and a 10% drop in full-time mature students.'*

(Independent Commission on  
Fees, 2015)



#### **4.4 Stakeholder perceptions of the translation of employability policy into university strategy**

##### **4.4.1 To what extent is it the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability?**

Generally, the respondents seemed to be of the opinion that universities do have some level of responsibility to prepare students in terms of graduate employability:

*'I think it's part of what universities do nowadays.'*

(Academic Staff 2)

This reflects the findings of Pukelis et al. (2007):

*'There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with higher education institutions.'*

(Pukelis et al., 2007, p.6)

A university manager noted the cultural shift that he had witnessed over his career:

*'[...] I get the impression that, over the years, some academics would take the view, well, students getting a job is neither here nor there. No interest*

*to them whatsoever. I think that's changed quite a lot. I think people realise this is part of the business, and also the students ... not instrumentally, but ... like it or not, students have paid a lot of money in order to gain certain kinds of qualifications which will help them in the employment market.'*

(Policy Level 6, university  
management, national bodies)

An academic who is also the owner of a recording studio and an employer felt strongly that it is one of the fundamental goals of a university to prepare students for graduate employment. He felt that a substantial proportion of the skills being developed within a course should be based on the industry requirements for that subject area. Alongside these fundamental skills students should develop an understanding of the business environment and how to work within aspects of the industry. Students should also develop project management skills and become familiar with aspects such as budgets and timescales.

Employers and those working at the highest level of university management were emphatic about there being a responsibility on universities to prepare students for graduate employment:

*'[...] if universities say it isn't their responsibility then they're mistaken'*

(Policy Level 7, university  
management)

*'Very much so. Yes, what other point would there be?'*

(Employer 5, audio products  
manufacturer)

*'that's what they're there for'*

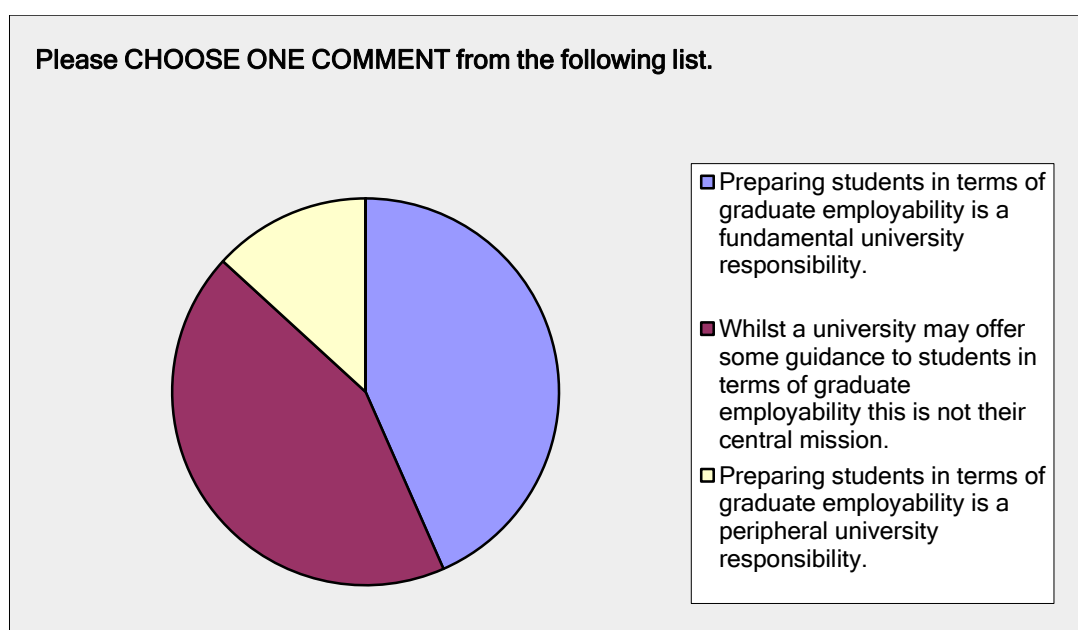
(Employer 7, specialist live  
events equipment hire)

In terms of the survey, the feedback indicated that the students thought that it is the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability to some extent (see Figure 11). 43.3% of students thought that 'Preparing students in terms of graduate employability is a fundamental university responsibility' and another 43.3% chose 'Whilst a university may offer some guidance to students in terms of graduate employability this is not their central mission'. Only 13.2% went for 'Preparing students in terms of graduate employability is a peripheral university responsibility'. None of the student respondents thought that it is not the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability. In one of the focus groups a student commented:

*'I think providing guidance is perfect. It shouldn't be the role of the university to get you job, but it should give you the support and the guidance to know how to get one afterwards.'*

(Students 1 final year)

**Figure 11: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'To what extent is it the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability?' (n = 53 respondents)**



One employer commented that employability was a key element for vocational courses but not necessarily for purely academic degrees. Another employer noted that whilst there is a need for variety in terms of focus across different universities, most students will be heading for the commercial world and as such need to be equipped to succeed in industry.

One individual working at a policy level highlighted the importance of clarity in

the way that types of degrees are portrayed to potential applicants. He felt that HEIs can have different business models: some can follow a research oriented business model; others might be more industry-focused and both models can co-exist, including within the same university. Crucially, the particular approach being taken by an individual university needs to be clearly articulated in their marketing material. Problems can occur when students misinterpret the ethos of the university that they are joining. He felt that universities were not managing their marketing as well as they might and that this key area needs addressing.

This emphasis on the importance of how universities portray their courses and what students can expect to get out of a course is echoed by an employer. He felt that in such a highly competitive environment, universities can exaggerate the benefits of their courses and mislead students:

*'It's a philosophical question. I think though that the way universities tout themselves as being the route to employment, they put a lot of weight on themselves to almost saying, 'we will make sure you are employable' but I think that most universities fail at that. If universities were a bit more honest about what it was they were selling, a lot less universities should say 'We will provide you with a degree, some skills and some knowledge, yeah? Alongside of that you need to do a lot of other things and speak to these other people to be employable'. So I think the way that universities present themselves does not correlate with what they need to be doing.*

*They are mismanaging expectations I believe.'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

The importance of the management of student expectations was echoed by another employer. He had witnessed an acting course at a particular HEI which offered highly skilled delivery and various opportunities for students to interact with industry professionals but although the approach was exemplary, the way in which the course was marketed exaggerated the potential for graduate success. In a highly competitive industry such as acting, even the best teaching, facilities and networking opportunities are no guarantee for success. He witnessed graduates becoming highly disillusioned when they struggled to progress in the forging of a professional acting career:

*'[...] I think the university has a lot to explain with that, because they were filling their heads with nonsense, which maybe you have to do as part of a performing course, because it is all about self-confidence, it is all about fronting it.'*

(Employer 9, live events  
sound specialists)

Lowden et al. (2011) found that whilst universities highlight a focus on enhancing the employability of students in their policies, there was great variance in extent to which such goals were manifest across individual faculties.

In a world of social media and opportunities for graduates to share their feedback on their undergraduate experiences, the inability of a course to live up to its own marketing can lead to recruitment problems in the long-term.

At policy level, differences appeared in terms of the perceived role of the university as a facilitator for graduate employment. It was noted by one Pro Vice Chancellor/Executive Dean that whilst universities have a responsibility to prepare graduates for the world of work, this responsibility does not extend to actually securing a job for a graduate:

*'Employability, yes, employment, no.'*

(Policy Level 7, university  
management)

In contrast, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of another ('plate glass') university stated that her institution was following a more commercial approach. At the end of a term the university careers service morphs into an employment agency. In line with this shift in direction, the university has employed careers staff with experience of running recruitment agencies rather than a background in university careers services.

One of the themes that emerged is that enhancing graduate employability is a partnership. A higher manager in a university commented that whilst universities are still receiving money they have a responsibility to society.

Individuals are making a huge personal investment when pursuing a degree. Such financial imperative places the onus on universities to facilitate this transition but employers also have a key role in this process and she felt that they were not necessarily putting the appropriate level of resources into this as they should.

An employer also highlighted the need for partnership but in the context of students and employers. The approach of the university needs to be flexible enough to support the full range of student career paths and ambitions. Students taking ownership of the development of their own employability echoes the findings of the CBI:

*'Ultimately, it is up to students themselves to seize the opportunities available to strengthen their employability [...]'*

(CBI, 2011b)

Employers commented on the balance that needs to be struck in terms of the relative emphasis placed on employability and this may vary over the course of a degree. One employer felt that the importance of employability should be highlighted in the final year as students can find themselves lacking direction at the end of their course. In contrast, another employer echoed the findings of Atfield and Purcell (2010) and felt that more should be done to educate students in terms of employability and the realities of the jobs market before they undertake a degree course.



#### **4.4.1.1 Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study link to the policy level consensus established in the review of literature that it is the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability (Wilson, 2012, HEA, 2006, Bridgstock, 2009). However, the feedback suggests that the extent to which employability-oriented initiatives can offer competitive advantage needs to be carefully considered. This study offers new knowledge in terms of highlighting the importance of managing student expectations in the context of this particular course type. Approaches to the enhancement of employability within a particular programme needs to be made apparent in course marketing material. Such an approach would mitigate against encouraging false expectations, the non-fulfilment of which may damage the long term credibility of individual courses.

Feedback from this study found that one of the universities has repositioned their approach to careers support towards that of an employment agency. At the input stage, universities have had to adopt more aggressive marketing in order to attract students in a highly competitive marketplace and may now be taking a more assertive position in terms of the output stage through efforts to ensure that it is their graduates that are securing graduate level jobs. Policy moves towards greater transparency in terms of graduate destinations, moving away from the current measure taken 6 months after graduation (HESA, n.d.) towards tracking career trajectories up to 10 years after graduation (Young,

2014) (see page 51) may well lead to such proactive initiatives becoming more commonplace across the sector.

#### **4.4.2 Pedagogy for employability**

Whilst at a policy level all universities are now required to provide opportunities for the enhancement of graduate employability (Wilson, 2012), the review of literature highlighted the differences of opinion across academia as to how this may be carried out in practice (Barrie, 2006).

Any discussion around pedagogies for the enhancement of student employability tends to involve a consideration as to the extent to which the teaching should be embedded within existing modules or are delivered via stand-alone modules (Pegg et al., 2012). In terms of how this should be carried out in practice, the review of literature suggested that at a policy level the consensus is that an embedded approach towards integrating employability within the curriculum is preferred over stand-alone modules (HEFCE, 2011b, HEA, 2015). The data gathered for this study supports the notion of an embedded approach for the enhancement of employability; individuals working at a policy level, academics and students were generally supportive of this approach. Academics also reflected on students gaining insight and skills through employability-oriented weeks and supplementary awards. Employers tended not to consider how employability should be enhanced from an academic perspective in terms of whether an embedded approach was

preferable, instead they highlighted the importance of students having opportunities for interactions with industry professionals. Students were also supportive of such interactions although it was highlighted that the timing of these collaborations was crucial in order to maximise the potential for learning.

Overall, the themes that emerge broadly reflect the findings of UKCES (2010a) which offered the following key principles. The teaching of employability should be based on real workplace practice: experiential, personal, reflective, structured and integrated and based on strong institutional leadership and with appropriate levels of resources.

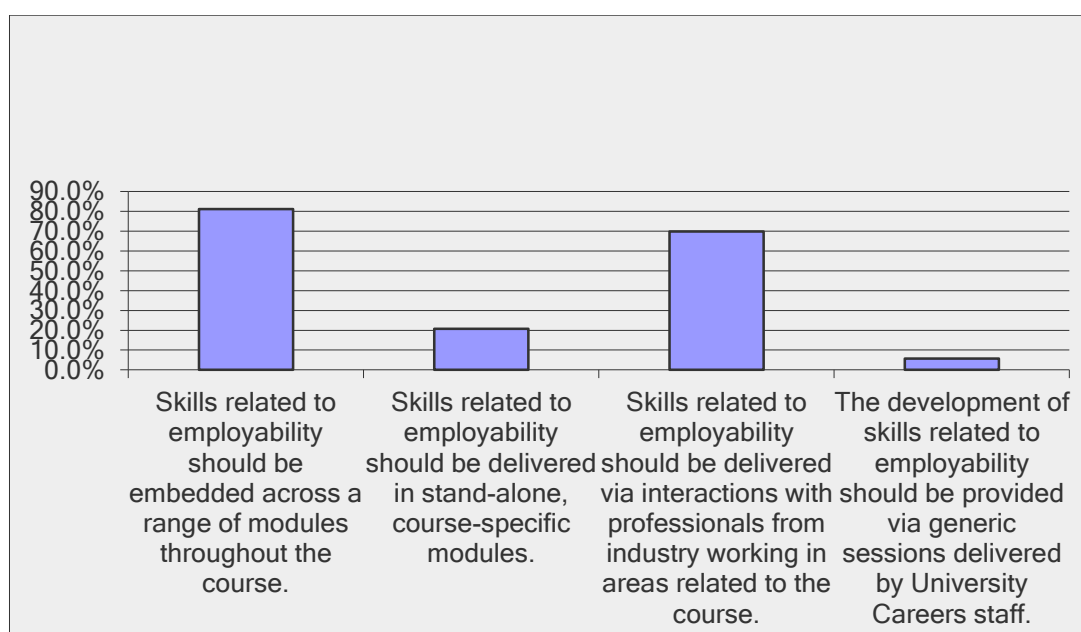
In response to the survey question, 'How should students develop skills related to employability within the context of an undergraduate degree?' students were asked to choose one or more responses from a given list (see Figure 12).

Overall, students indicated that they wanted an embedded approach to the delivery of employability-related material, ideally borne out of interactions with industry. 43% of students chose 'Skills related to employability should be embedded across a range of modules throughout the course', 37% chose 'Skills related to employability should be delivered via interactions with professionals from industry working in areas related to the course'.

Only 11% choose 'Skills related to employability should be delivered in standalone, course specific modules' and 3% chose 'The development of skills related to employability should be provided via generic sessions delivered by

university careers staff'. This approach is generally mirrored in feedback from the other 3 groups of stakeholders.

**Figure 12: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'How should students develop skills related to employability within the context of an undergraduate degree?' (n = 53 respondents)**



Those working at a policy level also tended to emphasise the importance of embedding employability across the curriculum:

*'I think they have to be embedded. I think one of the biggest challenges ... [...] is, engaging students with what can be quite abstract concepts, no matter how committed the graduate is ... or the undergraduate is. So, I think they've got to be embedded within the discipline, and I think if you can teach them skills of communication, team working, resilience and leadership, etc, etc, through the discipline, that is in my experience by far*

*the best way to do it. So students learn these things without knowing that they're learning them, if you see what I mean.'*

(Policy Level 7, university  
management)

*'So it is that you acquire different kinds of skills with different kinds of subject areas. But it has to be embedded within .... I think the skills element has to be there. It would be terribly tedious if everybody went round teaching skills all the time.'*

(Policy Level 6, university  
management, national bodies)

A university manager highlighted the importance of taking a holistic approach to course design and that employability should be integrated across the curriculum. She noted that one barrier to this approach is the way in which modules tend to be designed by individual academics who are focusing on their specific area rather than considering the wider course and any impact on the graduate employability. She argued that explicit links should be apparent across all modules alongside the highlighting of links between theory and practice.

Another individual working at a policy level for a network organisation highlighted issues around cascading centrally derived employability strategies across individual courses:

*'I'm sure, at the top level, senior managers are busy writing employability strategies. The question is, how those percolate through big institutions with lots of layers, with lots of ... not barriers, but ... contexts in which things get translated as they go down the system, and across the system, and where we end up. So there's a need, I think, to think about things, both in terms of partnerships, employers and academics, careers and academics, and there's also a need to think about programmes in a holistic way.'*

Policy Level 3 (network  
organisation)

An academic expressed a similar viewpoint and advocated integrated assessments which combine aspects from different modules. The benefit of such an approach is that it allows students to see how facets of the course are interrelated and this can support the development of professional practice as they experience team-based approaches to problem solving. Although he perceived the positive impact of such a cohesive approach to course delivery he went on to note that the logistics of such a strategy are difficult to manage.

Although there is a prevailing trend towards embedding employability within modules, one of the academics discussed the benefits of having separate, employability oriented sessions and reflected on the benefits that he had witnessed:

*'Unless you really focus with them, and spend some time talking to them about their own skills, and how those might be relevant to employability, a lot of them may not realise the skills that they've got that are of any use.'*

(Academic Staff 2)

This academic went on to discuss how feedback from the National Student Survey indicated that students felt that they did not get enough support in terms of enhancing their employability. He felt that in an integrated approach where employability is supported through workshops or guest lectures delivered by industry professional, students do not necessarily perceive that these sessions are specifically supporting the enhancement of employability. In order to address this, his institution introduced a Skills Enhancement Week which draws on the input of guest speakers including alumni and incorporates activities such as CV workshops and sessions that focus on helping students to see the links between what they are being taught on the course and its context in industry. The opportunity to focus on this area over a whole week facilitated possibilities for inter-disciplinary exchange. Students from his Music Technology-oriented course were exposed to aspects of lighting, computer games and fine art as well as exploring events more closely aligned to their subject area. Such activities have been seen to broaden students' horizons in terms of potential career paths.

The Skills Enhancement Week at this particular institution is open to students from all years and although the majority of interest tends to be from final year

students, individuals from earlier years are using this opportunity to build industrial contacts as a lever towards securing a placement year. Overall, having a week focused on employability has been seen to be a success, particularly in terms of a positive impact on students' perceptions of the university's efforts to enhance their employability. The academic stated that although the level and type of activities that were being provided for the students over the course of a year was very similar to how it had been in the past, concentrating such activities over one week had allowed students to focus on this key aspect of their development.

Alongside discussions around embedding employability across the curriculum and having focused 'employability weeks', academics also discussed the inclusion of employability-oriented modules. Academics were mindful of pressures on curriculum space and some also expressed cynicism over some employability-related initiatives with the pressures on course progression resulting in activities that lack credibility and academic rigour. The following extract highlights some of tensions around the integration of employability-related activities in undergraduate degrees as noted by Lowden et al. (2011). The reticence expressed by academic staff demonstrates that such initiatives are not necessarily welcomed by the course team. The following illuminates some of the deliberations over the inclusion of an employability-oriented module in the first year. The notion of disguising the delivery of employability-oriented material is evident:



M2 *'[...] the thing we've never had, which I was always massively opposed to, was a professional skills module in the first year. Many courses have a professional skills module in the first year, but I always thought, yes, but we're going to have to remove something ... solid, tangible skills, that we're going to give people, to put in some relatively basic stuff. But the plan at the moment is to bring in a professional skills type module.'*

M1 *'[...] It would be various basic things. It would just be some time management, research skills. [...] .... It's kind of like a little bit of marketing, a little bit of .... We throw them together and make them work in teams a lot, but ... give them a little bit of management theory behind teamwork, like building, and things like that. Not a lot, but a smattering of lots of different things. A bit of communication skills, a bit on teamwork, a bit on ... maybe simulating running a company. From a business point of view, maybe think about developing a product for the music industry, do a bit of research on an existing product. And it's kind of fairly basic, typical professional skills things.*

*[...] it would all be dressed up in the context of being in the music industry. It would all be music industry ... we'd be sneaking all the professional skills in under the banner of working in the music industry.'*

(Academic Staff 1)

In line with the findings of Gunn et al. (2010), what is evident from this conversation between academic staff is that they perceive the inclusion of employability-oriented modules to be at the expense of core course content. It is also apparent that in spite of their misgivings such a module is due to be incorporated into the first year. The reputation of professional skills oriented modules is such that the notion of disguising such material through contextualisation in the music industry is seen as positive approach.

Overall, this conversation illustrates key difficulties in enhancing graduate employability within the curriculum: academic staff may find it an imposition and the focus on improving generic skills needs to be carefully contextualised in order for students to develop such skills almost without realising it.

In the same discussion with academic staff, frustration was evident in the onus being placed on universities to develop basic skills such as written English when this should have been achieved whilst at school. One academic emphasised that it is the highly technical skills that will help graduates to secure employment and that universities should concentrate on these areas. He noted that students can find other ways to enhance the development of non-technical skills without infringing on curriculum space.

Similar frustrations were evident in discussions with academic staff at another university. One academic felt that key skills such as numeracy and literacy should be resolved whilst at school and that the level of qualification required

for entry to higher education should ensure that universities do not have to facilitate remedial work in these areas. His exasperation is evident in the following:

*'We're required to look at the numeracy and literacy. [...] ... to go to university, you're supposed to have GCSE in Maths and English. If that's not numeracy and literacy, what the hell is? I do not want my doctor or my surgeon to have all sorts of transferable skills. I want them to know how to use a scalpel, and to cut the right bloody bits at the right bloody time. End of. And if we start putting those into the degree, we start missing bits out.'*

(Academic Staff 3)

The inclusion of employability as an added pressure on curriculum space was also reflecting in discussions with individuals working at a policy level.

Concerns raised by academics over their requirement to integrate teaching aimed at enhancing graduate employability within courses reflect issues highlighted by Atkins (1999); in particular the concern that course-specific content may be reduced to allow for the inclusion of such activities to the detriment of student preparedness for the graduate jobs market. An academic interviewed for this study raised concern that employability can become a tick-box exercise. Laudable as the intentions of some schemes might be, without the discipline and culture of the workplace they can lack credibility. In his opinion, the key employability-related skills are *'self-discipline, persistence, punctuality,*

*attentiveness*' and that such skills need to be learnt tacitly. Reflecting on his own early career he stated:

*'I learnt about self-discipline because the consequences were, you were  
chucked out of work [...]'*

(Academic Staff 3)

Citing Drummond et al., Morley (2001) highlights the perception that although universities may espouse the enhancement of graduate employability scepticism persists amongst some academics:

*'Whereas many academics in Britain are cynical about the arguments  
being used to promote the significance of core, transferable or key skills,  
the majority of higher education institutions in the UK have institutional  
policies, directives and procedures that assert their commitment to the  
skills agenda.'*

(Morley citing Drummond et al., 2001, p.136)

Such views are echoed in data collected for this study; comparing his university's employability-related awards to '*swimming badges*' one academic argued that a university's demand for student progression means that such an initiative becomes a tick-box exercise. As an example of this he referred to efforts to recognise team working skills which if not achieved through group-

based activities, could be evidenced through an individual piece of work, '[...] because you can't let them fail'.

This academic felt strongly that a certificate borne out a university's employability initiative does not mean that a graduate has the employability skills as required by employers:

*'[...] A lot of employers [...], a lot of HR people will set up a job, and they'll [...] say, you need world of work skills, you need to be into personal skills, you need emotional intelligence, you need ... and you don't because you might be a programmer, sit in a corner, on your own, and what you really need is persistence, and dedication, and self-discipline, and ... [...] the problem with that is that you inevitably end up with a one-size-fits-all solution, and of course we all know, one size fits nobody.'*

(Academic Staff 3)

Such cynicism echoes the sentiments of Collini (2011):

*'On graduation [...], it's easy to imagine respondents ticking all the boxes to indicate that the goods and services they received corresponded to those promised, and yet being left with the uneasy feeling that they haven't been – as we used to call it – educated.'*

(Collini, 2011)

Such views contrast starkly with the findings of Lowden et al. (2011) that HEI representatives believe graduate award programmes have a valuable impact on graduate employment prospects and an individual's ability to succeed in their jobs.

Whilst the HEA (2006) emphasise the importance of involving students in collaborative work, students expressed concern that approaches to developing transferrable skills within a course can lack credibility:

*'[...] in all the group exercises, that kind of thing. There isn't the sense of leadership.*

*(in the workplace) [...], you would have this clear sense of management.*

*You know what you have to do, and if you don't do it, then the consequences are maybe a little bit harsher than maybe you get a bad grade, and a bad peer assessment.'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-  
placements)

An employer voiced concern that team work within a university course does not reflect the commercial world where typically a team would include at least one experienced individual:

*'[...] if you can start drawing people with experience into that project work, rather than rely on people at the same stage of their careers, i.e. before*

*they've started a career ... even if that's the role of the alumni, to actually come in and say, yes, of course we'll work with you, that will be great. [...] [...] the wall that a lot of people do hit isn't about what they can do, it's more to do with how long it takes them to do it. You know, the tough thing in work is that everything is done to deadline.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast  
industry, SME)

This employer was confident that industry professionals would be keen to work together with students on university based projects and to share their expertise. He felt that the benefits could be mutual. He argued that it would be a very powerful message to say to prospective students that in order to develop as collaborative team players they will not just be working with their student peers but will also be working in teams with experienced industry professionals. The industry professionals would work alongside students, they will not be evaluating the input of the students, rather they would be one of the team. He felt that such an approach would not just be beneficial to students. He contended that industry professionals would find it rewarding to share their skills and in such a fast-moving technology-driven environment, would benefit from interactions with the latest generation of 'digital natives'. This employer envisaged such interactivity as part of a greater 'porosity' between industry and academia. Whilst under a modular approach to learning, the sequence in which the learning takes place is crucial; certain skills are required in order to move onto the next level of learning, there are

opportunities for active learning. Students should be given opportunities to learn from their own mistakes and experimentation. Drawing on his own background in television production and direction, he advocates course teams engaging with local and perhaps national creative communities and adopting a *'porosity approach'* whereby academics, students and industry professionals can draw mutual benefit from the sharing of ideas and experience.

In line with this approach, one employer emphasised the need for students to develop an understanding that if they are to pursue careers closely aligned to music technology that this is a highly collaborative industry. He felt strongly that unless students are allowed opportunities to develop these skills whilst on their course, the transition into graduate employment can be a culture shock.

The importance of developing an appreciation of workplace practices through course content was highlighted by individuals working at a policy level, one commented:

*'[...] if you're expecting to get a job in a particular industry after doing that course, then how can it be totally divorced from that workplace? You know, there has to be some line of sight, or ... there has to be some links with employers, otherwise you're just not going to get there.'*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)



Individual employers and those working at policy level emphasised that in order to achieve this, there needs to be greater collaboration between academia and university careers departments and between HEIs and employers.

One of the employers highlighted the importance of foundation skills, developed in collaboration with industry professionals. He argued that such underpinning knowledge remains vital even in the face of rapid technology-driven change. In the context of Music Technology-oriented degree courses, the fundamentals of physics, maths, signal processing and electronics remain constant. The development of such foundation knowledge can enhance student confidence. The ways in which such skills can be taught and assessed can be designed to support the development of softer skills such as team work and presentation skills.

In line with the findings of Hall et al. (cited in Lowden et al., 2011), this employer highlighted the importance of placements as *'the ultimate'* approach to gaining industrial experience; he acknowledged that opportunities for students to interact with industry professionals through guest lectures and site visits are highly beneficial. He also alluded to industrial mentors and felt that many industry professionals would be happy to give some of their time in order to support students.

These themes were echoed by another employer both in terms of courses developing the right fundamental skills but also keeping up to date with

changes in technology. Drawing on his experience of television broadcasting he noted that whilst he had witnessed universities making efforts to liaise with the commercial world and to take on board professional practices, there are financial constraints which mean that universities are not always able to mirror the technology used in the professional environment.

A student spoke of the importance of physical resources and their potential to inspire greater application from students. He felt that it was incumbent on universities to invest as much as they are able in high quality resources in order to inspire students to engage with university work. Speaking in the context of BSc Music Technology-oriented courses he stated:

*'[...] what I got from this course is, you go into a recording studio, and you look at it, and you go, this looks horrible, I can't be bothered, I'm going home.'*

(Students 2, final year)

His colleague added:

*'It's what you come to university for, isn't it, to be able to do things you can't really do at home.'*

(Students 2, final year)

This sentiment reflects the findings of the HEA (2006) whose report contended that in order for such pedagogy to stimulate engagement students should be required to address learning tasks that reflect professional practice:

*'a pedagogy that optimises students' academic development is likely to be beneficial to the development of their employability.*

*'[...] in richly resourced contexts'*

(HEA, 2006, p.12)

An individual working at policy level commented that ideally teaching staff should have experience of working in the industry, particularly in the context of vocational courses.

Academics highlighted the importance of guest lecturers from industry. Such presentations can serve to underline the industrial relevance of course content. An employer emphasised the impact that guest lecturers can have in terms of highlighting the importance of networking and the significance of emotional intelligence in establishing and navigating through a graduate career. Guest lectures can also be a source of inspiration as they discuss interesting projects that they have been involved with and technology that they have used. The speaker may have been through a similar course themselves and their success can be motivational for current students. Another employer concurred:

*'I remember some of the seminars that I had at university, and you come away thinking, OK, I'm quite interested in that subject area, and I know what his background was, therefore I know that's one of the ways I can get into that industry. I think that's massive. I think that's a huge part, probably more so than most other elements, other than having these modules that help sort of prepare you for the interview, and ... CVs and so on.'*

(Employer 6, audio products specialists)

Although employers tended to see direct interactions between students and industry professionals as a good thing, one employer had a note of caution. He felt that guest lectures were peripheral and their benefits hard to quantify. He advocated that a more structured approach would be preferable, perhaps with degree courses operating more like apprenticeships and for course teams to work very closely with key employers in terms of course development and delivery, perhaps involving staff secondments.

Another employer was also supportive of closer integration between individual universities and companies; he also framed this in terms of an apprenticeship. An Australian himself, he noted the connotations of class associated with apprenticeships in the UK:

*'I also think this polarisation of class through learning versus on-the-job is way too separated, yeah? The two need to work in conjunction.'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

He envisaged a flexible arrangement whereby students are taught theory at university and get to apply what they have learnt in an industrial context with an employer. As the managing director of a company this employer was confident that the logistics of such an arrangement would not be insurmountable.

The same employer also explored the level and context in which it may be best to teach aspects related to employability. He said that in discussion with his staff they had considered what a company such as theirs would be able to teach placement students. Whilst he was comfortable with teaching technical skills, subject knowledge and offering insight into the industrial context, he felt that it was not appropriate for the company to try and teach the fundamentals of having a good work ethic, presentation skills, honesty and integrity. He did not feel that these were areas that universities should be focusing on either; rather these were perhaps more related to parenting.

One of the academics highlighted the incorporation of live briefs/workplace scenario projects. At his university students have the opportunity to get involved with business simulation projects as a replacement for a placement

year. Through this experience, students have the opportunity to actually sell products and to negotiate contracts with multinational companies such as Microsoft.

Students at another university spoke of their experience of working with employers on coursework and highlighted the importance of timing as a key factor as to extent of the benefits that can be gained from such an approach. The student had been involved with a project with a local company in his first year and felt that neither he nor his colleagues were at the right stage in the course to fully appreciate the potential of such collaboration. He advocated such projects being focused on the final year when students are more focused on securing a job and may be better placed to embrace opportunities to interact with industry professionals.

Another student commented that for a student to appreciate aspects of employability they need a more mature outlook:

*'I'd say that's it's incredibly hard. It's a mindset. I didn't properly grow up until I went and worked for a year, and then came back, and I don't really know how you can do that without forcing people to go out into the real world. I mean, I worked for a year before I came here, but ... I grew up, but I still wasn't ready to think about even employment afterwards. [...] I think placement work is so important.'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-  
placements)

One of the individuals working at a policy level also highlighted that placements and work experience were beneficial to students in terms of developing their employability:

*'And one of the things that the OECD is very keen on is that all vocational education should have some element that is in the workplace. So, some experience of work. And they're very strong on it. They think it should be mandatory. And they make quite a powerful argument for it.'*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)

This was echoed in feedback from employers. Employers highlighted the potential of placements to give students some industrial experience, not least in terms of the discipline of the workplace but also the potential to build start building a network of industrial contacts:

*'If someone came to me and said, I've just finished university, the first thing I'd say is, did you do a placement year? Without a doubt that's the first thing I'd say. I didn't say, how well did you do? Or, what mark did you get?'*

*You know, did you do a placement, and where did you do it? What experience have you got?’*

(Employer 1, live events  
sound specialists)

An employer highlighted the benefits for students of having to interact with the ‘outside world’. Another employer spoke of the importance of learning how to work with clients and to consider what makes for a good client experience. Another employer spoke of his experiences at a university that had its own commercial theatre. Students learnt a range of technical skills in the context of providing entertainment for paying customers. He felt this offered a unique opportunity to balance course-based learning with commercial and professional awareness:

*‘You know, so we had this big theatre, and every single project of ours was The result of ... even in the first year, was a public show. People could buy tickets for it. And getting into that routine ... from the first year, I can’t even count how many shows I’d done. Just horrible theatre shows with lots of loud mics, and being force-fed theatre for 3 years. But you get into the routine of it. You get into the routine of, this is a public show, it’s not just friends and family of the actors and dancers coming to see the show. And I think that’s really, really good to get you learning about consequences.’*

(Employer 9, live events  
sound specialists)



One of the individuals working at a policy level raised the issue that in order for tutors to be able to teach in a credible way that supports the enhancement of student employability they need to be given time for personal development. Courses need to adapt in line with a dynamic industrial environment. He questioned how academic staff could be expected to keep abreast of evolving skillsets and theoretical discourse if their time is taken up with teaching. In his experience not enough tutors were being given staff development time in order to keep up with changes in the professional environment. He went on to highlight the importance of preparing graduates for fast-evolving industries through careful curriculum design. He emphasised the need to balance the development of practice-based skills with higher level skills of negotiation, teamwork, independence:

*'[...] if you have a purely skills-based curriculum, totally skills-based, and if those students are merely mimicking the production processes of today, when something new comes in, so, a new piece of software, or a new paradigm, or a new workflow, they won't have the reflexes to be able to adapt, and to use that.*

*'[...] So I think the plasticity of the students is really important. So if you're totally about skills, then you're breeding automatons who won't be able to adapt to the new [...].'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

This balanced approach has parallels that of Yorke (2006) who highlighted that undergraduate degrees should contain a mix of abstraction, system thinking, experimentation and collaboration.

The role of a university's careers service was discussed in the context of enhancing graduate employability. A Vice-Chancellor considered how the perception of his university's careers service had changed over the years. He acknowledged that university careers services need to be outward-facing and to be responsive in the way they operate. He emphasised that careers services need to be integrated into the wider university and that the whole university has a collective responsibility to support employability. Another individual working at a policy level for a network organisation also advocated an integrated approach to careers within a university:

*'[...] some staff who would say, that is not my job. My job is to teach my subject. [...]*

*And I think a way of responding to that might be to reconfigure the notion of careers context, not from being a specialist unit somewhere else, but as a consultancy service to the staff and the students in a particular context.'*

(Policy Level 6 university  
management, national bodies)

He felt that a careers service can help students to draw together and evidence their range of experiences either directly from the course or through

extracurricular activities. In order for this to happen successfully careers staff need to be partners within departments rather than perceived as separate by students. Echoing the findings of Booth (2003) an academic from another university also highlighted the importance of helping students to perceive the importance and relevance of what they have learnt on their course and how this relates to a commercial context.

The emphasis that is placed on employability at the highest levels of university management is pivotal in the terms of the extent and depth to which a university engages with graduate employability. An academic spoke of the importance of his university's Vice Chancellor in driving the employability agenda within his university and that this focus is perceived as being based on his genuine principles by staff rather than simply keeping in line with current trends in higher education.

#### **4.4.2.1 Implications of Findings**

All stakeholders that contributed to this study would seem to concur that enhancing an individual's employability is now part of the remit of higher education. The review of literature established that the prevailing pedagogy for the enhancement of employability within a particular higher education programme is based on embedding employability across the curriculum, an approach that is perceived to be preferable to stand alone modules (Cranmer, 2006; UKCES, 2009; HEFCE, 2011b; HEA, 2015; Lees, 2002). The findings of this

study, whilst demonstrating a link to this over-arching trend offers new insight as to how the inclusion of teaching related to the enhancement of employability is perceived by stakeholder groups in the context of a particular course type. The findings of this study would suggest that a level of scepticism remains, particularly amongst academic staff.

Staff may benefit from training in the support of an integrated approach to supporting employability across the curriculum:

*'Pedagogy is central to improving employability and teaching employability skills well is at least as challenging as teaching specific knowledge and technical skills. Many of the skills required are the same as those needed to teach well generally, but it does require some distinctive skills and attributes, including an understanding of how people learn to develop personal employability skills and the ability to contextualise employability-related teaching within vocational programmes. We cannot assume that all practitioners have these skills and attributes.'*

(UKCES, 2010a, p.5)

If academics perceive that initiatives lack credibility their lack of commitment may undermine the potential of such learning experiences:

*'It is essential that any changes to the curriculum are owned by the staff delivering the modules, if they are to be successfully implemented. Atlay and Harris (2000) comment that it is important to work with the culture*

*and values of the institution and of HE itself. [...] However, de la Harpe et al. (2000) conclude that 'in the anarchy of individualism that is academia, the responses of staff varies unpredictably... little can be achieved without staff commitment accompanied by an agreed change process'.*

(Lees, 2002, p.5)

Exploring employability through assessments that draw from a range of modules offers the potential to mirror the complexities of the professional practice but may be difficult to facilitate. Focused employability weeks also offer the potential to focus in this area and can act as a catalyst for innovative teaching practice. Freed from the constraints of a module syllabus, academics and students can experiment in a less formal structure.

More radical approaches for the enhancement of employability were proposed by employers. Suggestions that involved universities working in closer partnership with employers and perhaps taking on approaches borne out of apprenticeships would indicate that there is an appetite for greater involvement with HEIs by employers.

Individuals working at policy level and employers highlighted the potential benefits of academic staff spending time working alongside industry professionals within companies. However, such industrial experience and training was not mentioned by academic staff as part of this study.

#### **4.4.3 Perceptions of Schemes to Reward ‘Employability’**

The Literature Review highlighted that schemes designed to reward the enhancement of skills seen to be beneficial in terms of employability are being established across the higher education sector in order to address student apathy regarding this area of personal development (Atkins, 1999, Teichler, 2014). The findings of this study would suggest that employers and to a lesser extent students, lack awareness of such schemes and awards.

Those working at a policy level expressed unanimous support for such initiatives. Generally, employers were also positive about the potential for these initiatives to offer more insight into the attributes of a particular candidate but reservations were raised:

*‘I don’t think it is for the University to tell me how good a person is.’*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

Employers commented that the current system is well understood and easy for employers to interpret. There is a danger that the proliferation of different awards related to transferable skills may be confusing for employers. This resonates with the findings of Tibby:

*‘Employers are confused by the range of employability awards and how to assess their value’*

(Tibby, 2012, p.3)

Employers also highlighted the need for quality assurance around any new schemes in order for the extra awards to have credibility.

In general, academics expressed reservations about such schemes. They also raised concerns regarding the credibility of systems that could become ‘tick-boxing’ exercises and the implications of such initiatives for the integrity of higher education:

*M3     ‘It’s the FE-isation, isn’t it, of university.’*

(Academic Staff 3)

Academics also expressed concern at the workload associated with such schemes. Students were generally supportive of the new awards but also expressed reservations. Concerns were raised around the types of activities that would be deemed to be verifiable and that the scope of such measurable activities would be fairly narrow.

An example of a particular initiative related to enhancing graduate employability is the HEAR. The HEAR is a national scheme that has been developed to encourage a more holistic approach to the formal recording of graduate achievements by capturing extracurricular experience gathered over

the course of a degree (see page 2). The initiative has been taken up by a number of UK universities and is being carefully monitored across the sector.

Generally, feedback from the interviews and focus groups would suggest that although there was a lack of awareness of the HEAR, particularly amongst employers and students, respondents were positive about the benefits of such a scheme.

None of the employers interviewed for this study were aware of the HEAR, however once the concept had been explained to them they were generally positive about the initiative (seven were positive, four had mixed views, only one was negative), particularly as a tool to support the recruitment process. One employer felt that the HEAR offers the potential to add credibility to some of the extracurricular activities that individuals allude to on their CVs. This employer added that the involvement of a university in verifying some of these attributes added validity. Evidence of involvement within university societies, perhaps with budgetary responsibilities could be seen as an indication of maturity and the ability to handle responsibility for a potential employer.

Another employer, who had not been through a degree course himself, stated that he had never read a degree transcript and did not know what one was. Echoing the findings of Yorke (2006) he stated that when recruiting, he placed a low priority on educational qualifications. He welcomed the potential of the HEAR to capture softer skills as his focus when evaluating an application is on



how an individual can demonstrate their interest and aptitude for the advertised role.

An employer from a company that manufactures audio products highlighted the generic nature of many CVs and commented that the HEAR might offer a useful way of highlighting employability. He commented that when applying for placements or graduate positions, students tend not to emphasise their personality; as a recruiter he is interested in finding out more about individuals: their motivations and hobbies, as such details offer insight into an applicant's employability.

An employer from another manufacturer of audio products acknowledged that when considering a CV, whilst he is initially looking for confirmation that the applicant has a degree, once that has been established he is also keen to explore the outside interests of a candidate. He felt that the inclusion of the HEAR would encourage students to take the gathering and evidencing of such experience more seriously.

An employer more directly involved in live events could only see the addition of the HEAR as being positive. In his experience many graduates go on to pursue careers that are not directly related to their degrees and that the HEAR could be another method by which graduates can demonstrate where their passions and interests may lie. He emphasised that if an individual can secure a job that is aligned to their interests they are more likely to find job satisfaction.

An employer with a background in television broadcasting stated that in his experience employers will judge applications on first impressions. Employers are looking for particular skills and he felt that the addition of the HEAR could be another opportunity for graduates to demonstrate that they have the competencies that an employer requires:

*'[...] a lot of employers will say, actually we will judge them almost on face value. You know, we won't be too conscious of where they're come from, we will say, this is what we want out of somebody, do you have what we want? [...] And whether that's the kind of inevitable consequence of this idea that graduates actually don't necessarily have the skills that the businesses want ... but there's still a gap there. Anything that helps to bridge that gap sounds like a really good idea.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast  
industry, SME)

Another employer with a background in broadcasting, in this instance with a national broadcaster, was also positive about the HEAR. In his experience employers in the broadcast sector are looking for degree qualifications:

*'[...] but I'm not convinced that there's always as strong a correlation as you'd like there to be between the degree classification and how successful somebody is in the role, or getting through the training.'*

(Employer 12, broadcast  
industry, national  
broadcaster)

He saw the HEAR as a useful tool in the recruitment process. Typically, as a recruiter he might set a threshold at candidates requiring a 2i degree classification and would then be looking for evidence of various competencies to support this. He felt that the HEAR would enable his organisation to *'[...] set a more meaningful minimum entry level.'*

Although employers were generally positive about the HEAR, reservations were expressed with regard to quality assurance. Two employers separately expressed concerns over how such a scheme may be standardised across different institutions. Perceptions of variability by employers may serve to undermine the credibility of such a scheme.

An individual from an industry skills body highlighted the limitations of formal qualifications and the importance of the portfolio in the creative sector:

*'[...] qualifications were a kind of assurance for employers back in the day, which doesn't really make much sense now. It's about the show-reel, or about the portfolio, or about other ways of portraying ... [...] qualifications can only do so much these days, and I think employers see qualifications as*

*a filtering mechanism. Sometimes unfairly, as well. [...] I think employers will look at all the other things.'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

Some employers did have reservations particularly with regard to quality assurance of such a scheme where the areas under consideration are so variable:

*'[...] how would you normalise the entire process between institutes, [...] how is the involvement of that student assessed? If a student says, I was involved with the student union doing this, how is that assessed with regards to somebody, say, in Sheffield, somebody in Birmingham. If they both get involved, how much of an involvement is there, and therefore does it get the same point score? '*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

The workload created by such a scheme was also of concern:

*'A massive overhead, as I see it, [...] it's almost like a marking criteria across institutes, which I would say is very, very difficult to achieve, although if it were achievable it would be a great thing'*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

A key issue raised by employers and academic staff is the concern that some students would be at a disadvantage and perhaps would not be able to access the opportunities that would feed into such a document. For instance, if student societies are being used as the main means by which verified roles feed into an individual student's HEAR transcript then inevitably some students will be at a disadvantage as there only a limited number of roles available. Another employer commented:

*'but there's only room for one treasurer, so there's no widening participation, as such.'*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

One employer from a live events based company stated that not only had his employer not seen his degree, he doubted that his employer knew what degree he had been studying. He secured his job through work experience undertaken whilst a university student. This graduate indicated how the level of investment that students are now required to make in order to pursue a degree means that they need to obtain maximum benefit from the experience. This employer emphasised the importance of the need to educate employers about this scheme. This sentiment was echoed by another employer who stated that

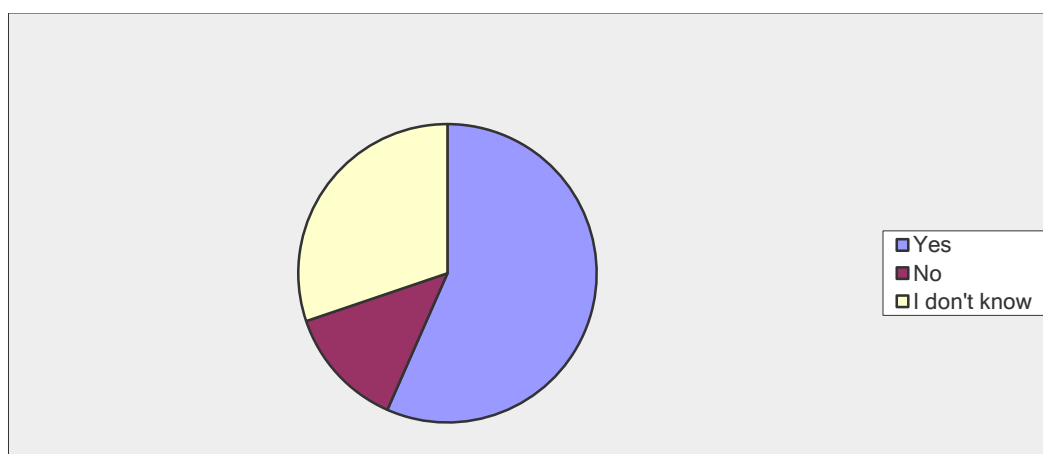
employers are used to the current system; they understand the grading criteria. If the system were to be enhanced there would have to be a campaign to educate employers:

*'[...] the first, 2i, 2ii, third system is recognised by everybody. Even if you didn't go to university, people know what it is. People know if you got a 2ii or a third, you drank too much. People know if you did a 2i, they'll ask how close you were to a first. [...]'*

(Employer 9, live events  
sound specialists)

The importance of such a document places another responsibility on academic staff and one employer wondered how objective an academic might be in such circumstances. In line with the findings of the CBI (2011) student respondents to this study seemed generally supportive of the concept of the HEAR. When asked, 'Do you think non-academic achievement, typically related to transferable skills, should be recognised in a degree transcript?' 56.6% of the student respondents thought such skills should be formally recognised, 30.2% 'didn't know' and 13.2% were not supportive of such an award. See Figure 13.

**Figure 13: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'Do you think non-academic achievement typically related to transferable skills, should be recognised in a degree transcript?' (n = 53 respondents)**



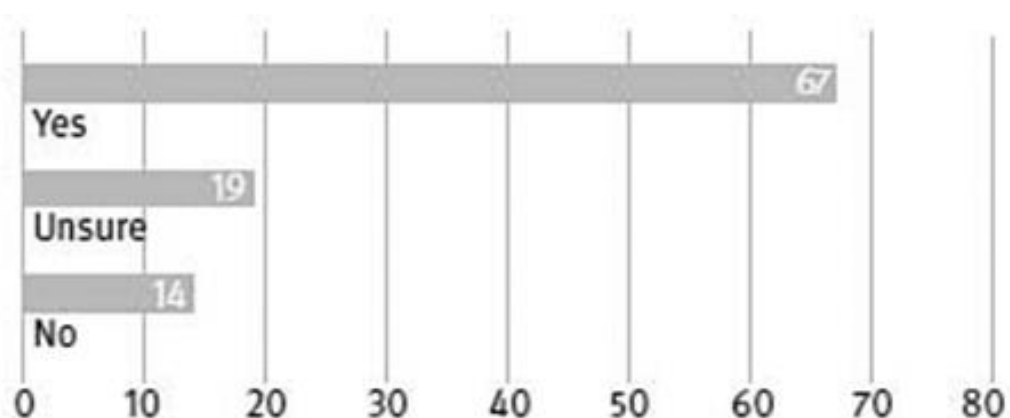
Respondents to this survey were invited to add a brief comment to explain their answers. One of the students felt that a degree does not adequately reflect a person's abilities. Other students highlighted the potential of the scheme to facilitate differentiation and for students to be able to use the HEAR as a means of standing out in a crowded jobs market.

A reservation expressed by one respondent was that there was a danger that students could become distracted in the pursuit of employability-related experience to the detriment of their academic work. Another student underlined the importance of equal access to opportunities related to the enhancement of employability.

Similar responses were seen in a student survey conducted by the CBI (2011), where 67% of respondents said 'yes' to the question 'Would you value having a formal, nationally recognised record of the employability skills you

have developed in your time at university both in the classroom and in extra curricular activities?’ see Figure 14.

**Figure 14: Wanting a Nationally Recognised Record? (CBI, 2011, p.33)**



Feedback gained from focus groups with students indicated that whilst students were positive about the HEAR and its potential to motivate undergraduates, ultimately employers are looking for strong academic credentials.

Staff from one university, students and an employer were negative about the HEAR. Academic staff voiced concern that initiatives such as the HEAR undermined the principles of independent learning with bureaucratic expediency:

M2     *'[...] it's so ironic, in a way, that all this emphasis on skills, and we're moving further and further away from what I think is the defining characteristic of a graduate, and that's a self-learner with the*



*mental machinery that enables them to analyse, to ... take anything and analyse it'*

*[...]*

M5 *'Where before someone was doing that because they want to do it, and that gives you that set of interests, set of learning, set of driven ... he's interested about his subject, you know. Now we're just saying, tick boxes.'*

(Academic Staff 3)

Students from the same university also had reservations. One student noted that many students are involved in various activities outside of university that may not be reflected in the HEAR. One of his colleagues added that many students do not want to get involved with societies and this is not necessarily because they are not interested in enhancing their skills but may be due to the activities of the societies not interesting them personally. This student felt that it would be unfair for a student to gain an advantage through perhaps tenuous involvement with a society when another student may be equally skilled.

An employer had serious reservations about the HEAR and the potential of university-derived metrics based on aspects related to employability to offer valuable information to recruiters:

*'Any employer who looks at one metric as to how good that person is and how employable that person is a bit of a lousy recruiter actually because*

*humans can't be placed in metrics or pigeonholes or otherwise. And I would be particularly interested in how some bureaucratic process classifies a person as a human being with all their quirks, weirdness and strengths and weaknesses.'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

Whilst this employer appreciated what the HEAR was designed to achieve, he argued that a more credible approach would be through closer involvement with employers. He advocated students undertaking short internships with companies, based on which, the employer could confirm that they have learnt a certain set of pre-determined skills. He envisaged that such a scheme would need to be based on national standard and would involve universities creating learning frameworks which would help employers to facilitate the internships, offer underpinning credibility and maximise the potential of such experiences for students.

The HEAR has the potential to feed into an electronic database (*'gradintel'*), allowing employers to search for particular skillsets from a graduate pool. Generally, respondents were positive about the added value that an electronic system based on an online database could offer, and drew parallels with the professional social networking site LinkedIn:

M4     *'It kind of reminds me of Linked In. It's almost the same thing, because it's much more innovative, and targeted to exactly what you're after.'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-placements)

This student's colleague was also enthusiastic and highlighted the benefits to graduates in terms of efficiency as they would be being invited to apply to jobs that are suited to their skillset.

An academic, whilst positive about the potential of such a database was more cautious about the benefits stating that such a system would suit graduates from some courses rather than others.

Considering such an application in the context of potential benefits to students from BSc Music Technology-oriented degrees, an employer used the example of specialist sound recording software when he stated:

*'[...] if you could look at people within a 100 mile radius that are able to use Pro Tools, or have a Pro Tools certificate, straight away you could have candidates for a potential job, yes.'*

(Employer 9, live events sound specialists)

Employers were generally extremely positive about the potential of such a system:

*'[...] from an employer's point of view, I think that would be brilliant. [...] Just the fact that you can sort of proactively say, right, I want somebody with these skills ... it would be great. On the other side of it, it's nice to see people applying for positions, because it shows that they want to work at ... the job.'*

(Employer 3, audio products manufacturer)

Another employer, from a national broadcaster, highlighted the potential of such a system in terms of increasing efficiency in the process of recruitment. An employer from a SME in the broadcast sector was also enthusiastic:

*'[...] if the aim with the universities is to say, we can give you a more fulsome report on the individuals that come through our institution, I think that can only be a good thing. If by the same token as you've described it, it is something that would be searchable and accredited, then it's the first part of that move into a kind of guild approach that says, this person didn't just do some modules on it, their work is deemed to be to this level. Without again putting a great chundering bureaucracy in place, it does say ... and I'm a big fan of meta-data ... it does say you could actually connect people.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast  
industry, SME)

This employer liked the potential of the database to increase an individual graduate's visibility to potential employers, not just upon completion of a course but before and during studying for a degree. It also increases the potential for graduates to be made aware of opportunities further afield.

An individual working at a policy level who was closely involved in the development of the HEAR stated:

*'[...] if you haven't convinced the higher education community, they'll be loath to do it, and if you haven't convinced employers, they'll say, well, we don't want to use it.'*

(Policy Level 6, university  
management, national bodies)

#### **4.4.3.1 Implications of Findings**

Whilst the findings of this study would suggest that employers in particular are enthusiastic about the scheme, the evidence gathered indicates issues with regard to publicising the HEAR as none of the employers that were interviewed were aware of it. This issue is compounded by the fact that many universities offer alternative graduate award schemes that serve a similar purpose in terms

of highlighting skills and attributes related to graduate employability. The proliferation of schemes and the lack of comparability of awards from one institution to another can serve to undermine attempts to articulate and reward graduate employability.

Furthermore, employers may welcome schemes that offer the potential for greater efficiency when filtering or proactively searching for new recruits but such systems need to be robust, easy to use and based on credible data. While acknowledging the limitations of the traditional system, employers are used to interpreting this system of classification.

Universities need to ensure equal access to opportunities that feed into graduate awards such as the HEAR. Careful consideration needs to be given to students who are unable to engage with societies for a variety of reasons: some students are also carers; others may be constrained by part time work commitments. Mature students in particular may be less inclined to get involved with societies and may be balancing various external commitments.

The skills and organisation involved in managing studies, part time work and perhaps children, may highlight skills and attributes that are aligned with the traits employers are looking for when recruiting graduates but such experiences may not be captured in additional university award schemes.

Echoing the findings of Teichler (2014), feedback from academics highlights the danger of infantilising students. There is an argument that students should perceive the importance of taking a holistic approach to the development of their personal skills and attributes and that requiring them to fulfil prescribed activities does not engender a mature, proactive approach.

#### **4.4.4 What should be the nature of employer/university relationships and how might these best be enhanced?**

The findings of the Literature Review suggest that at a policy level closer collaboration between higher education and industry is seen as imperative. Whilst it is acknowledged that there is greater collaboration than previously, this needs to be further enhanced (Wilson, 2012). Feedback for this study from individuals working at a policy level would support this view.

Students are positive about industry representatives having an input into course development although they emphasise that the role of academics is to take a more objective view as to the broader skills that students need to develop in order to succeed in the pursuit of a wide range of potential career paths.

Whilst welcoming interactions with industry, there was evidence that academic staff are reticent about developing closer working partnerships with individual companies.

Generally, feedback from this study would suggest that these employers are positive about the benefits of closer collaboration between industry and higher education. Some employers ventured suggestions for models for collaboration: mutually beneficial interactions related to business development, recruitment, the use of university facilities by companies, research, sponsorship, input into course content by industry professionals, mentoring, projects and 'virtual science parks'.

The benefits of collaboration that were highlighted by the Lambert Review (2003) were reflected in feedback from an employer for this study who focused on the benefits for both parties of on-going interactions. Employers can share their expertise and perhaps technical resources with students and academics although protections such as non-disclosure agreements would need to be in place in order to protect the interests of the company. Such interactions may offer the potential for employment for students. He also saw potential in the possibilities for companies to exploit some of the specialist physical resources within universities. There may be valuable resources purchased by a university for research or teaching purposes which companies may need on an occasional basis. An example of such a resource in the context of his work might be an anechoic chamber; a room designed to completely absorb reflections of either sound or electromagnetic waves and ideally suited to testing. The intermittent use of an expensive resource such as this by an employer could be facilitated at no extra cost for a HEI and would be a valued resource for an employer. Such mutually beneficial arrangements would serve to underpin on-going



partnership between companies and universities. One employer noted that universities need students to secure graduate employment on completion of their course and employers need to exploit talent. An individual from a company that manufactures audio products suggested that it is in the interests of employers to be proactive in their interactions with HEIs if they are to source graduates with the potential to make a difference to their organisation.

The positive benefits of closer interaction were echoed by one of the individuals working at policy level:

*'I think it has to be mutually beneficial. So the employer has to get something from it, whether that's a recruitment pipeline, or whether by offering, for example, work placements, the university then does something in a different space with that employer. So maybe something about research or development, [...] it doesn't just have to be a straightforward relationship, there can be lots of different dimensions to it [...].'*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)

The advantages of collaboration can be subtle. One employer spoke of the benefits of representatives from a company offering hands-on workshops at universities. The students that attend these sessions will eventually move into graduate employment and may be in a position to approach the company as a

potential client in the future. Also, such interactions offer the possibility for talent spotting from the student body.

An employer from an SME highlighted the importance of fresh graduate talent as part of a strategy for dealing with the fast pace of technological change.

Another employer noted that in the context of his company, the level of physical work that is required relies on a young, fit workforce and universities offer a potential supply of such labour.

One employer emphasised that interactions with employers allow academics an opportunity to ensure that their course content remains relevant and up to date:

*'I think there's perhaps not enough communication. I suppose it's difficult sometimes because people are working for a business, they might not have too much time, but I think communication is very important. [...] our industry is changing so much, [...] I think maybe some degree courses haven't quite caught up with the way the industry is at the moment [...]*

(Employer 3, audio products manufacturer)

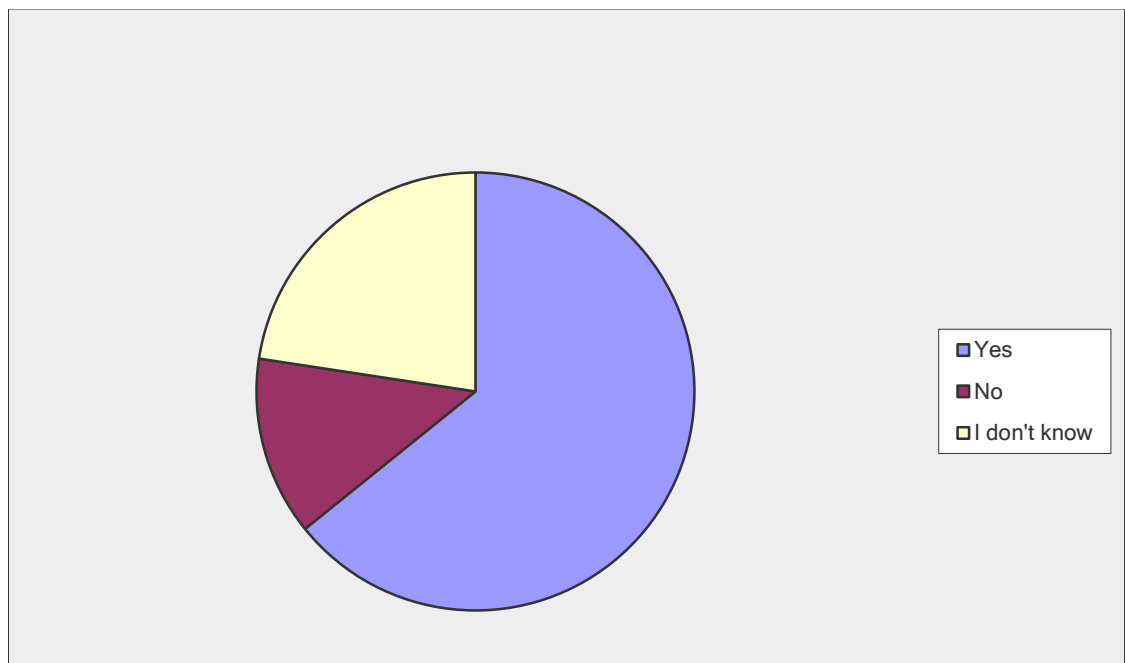
Employers supported more ongoing interactions throughout the year including more industry visits to universities (above and beyond end of year shows),

employer contributions to syllabus development and academic visits to companies.

One employer alluded to the mix of interactions that could be possible including mutually beneficial events such as seminars and the showcasing of company products which as well as educating the students, can serve as a way of highlighting the work and culture of the company which may encourage students to apply for jobs with the organisation in the future. He highlighted student fairs and sponsorships including support for postgraduate study. He also highlighted the benefits of joint research projects which can facilitate relationships on a deeper level and may have side benefits such as universities gaining access to equipment through sponsorship arrangements with companies.

Overall, students were very positive about the potential benefits of closer collaboration between universities and companies. In the survey, students were asked, 'Do you think employer representatives should have an input into the development and/or delivery of undergraduate degrees?' 64% agreed that they should (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'Do you think employer representatives should have an input into the development and/or delivery of undergraduate degrees? (n = 53 respondents)**



Students were invited to explain their answers and feedback from one student illustrates the generally enthusiastic responses as to whether employers should have an input into the development of degree courses:

*'Definitely! They know through experience the knowledge and skills that are most valuable in their field and could help to tailor a course for a more employable graduate.'*

Whilst students were generally positive about the potential of input from industry, some expressed reservations. There was some reticence about employers being involved in delivery and in particular there was concern over the potential for the influence of particular companies leading to a narrowing of

the curriculum. One student underlined the importance of academics being able to see the wider context:

*'[...] there must be a limit. Employers can deliver sessions to inform students with the latest news from the industry but the curriculum must be decided by the lecturers with criteria that takes into account the industry desires but also present students with all the opportunities their field has.'*

Another expressed a need for balance:

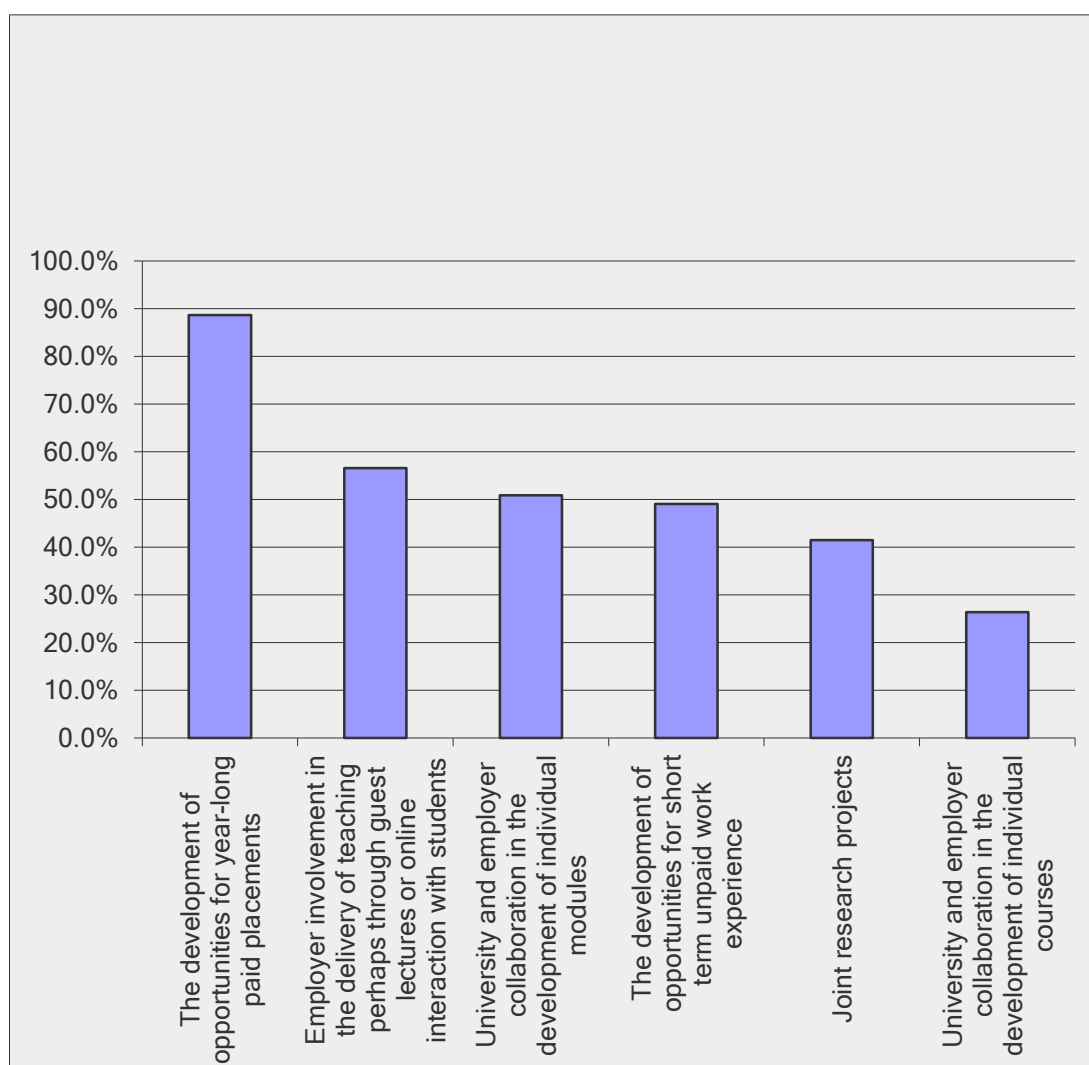
*'While employability is a factor in a university degree, I do not think it should necessarily be the major focus.'*

When asked what should be the nature of university/employer collaboration, survey feedback from students (students could select one or more comments from a given list) indicated that nearly 90% thought that this should be based on the development of opportunities for year-long paid placements (see Figure 16). Nearly 57% felt that employers should be involved in the delivery of teaching perhaps through guest lectures or online interactions with students.

Half of the students surveyed thought that universities and employers should collaborate in the development of individual modules and in the development of opportunities for short term unpaid work experience.

41.5% recognised joint research projects as a factor and just over a quarter highlighted university and employer collaboration in the development of individual courses. Slightly less (24.5%) felt that universities and employers should collaborate in the development of assessment strategies.

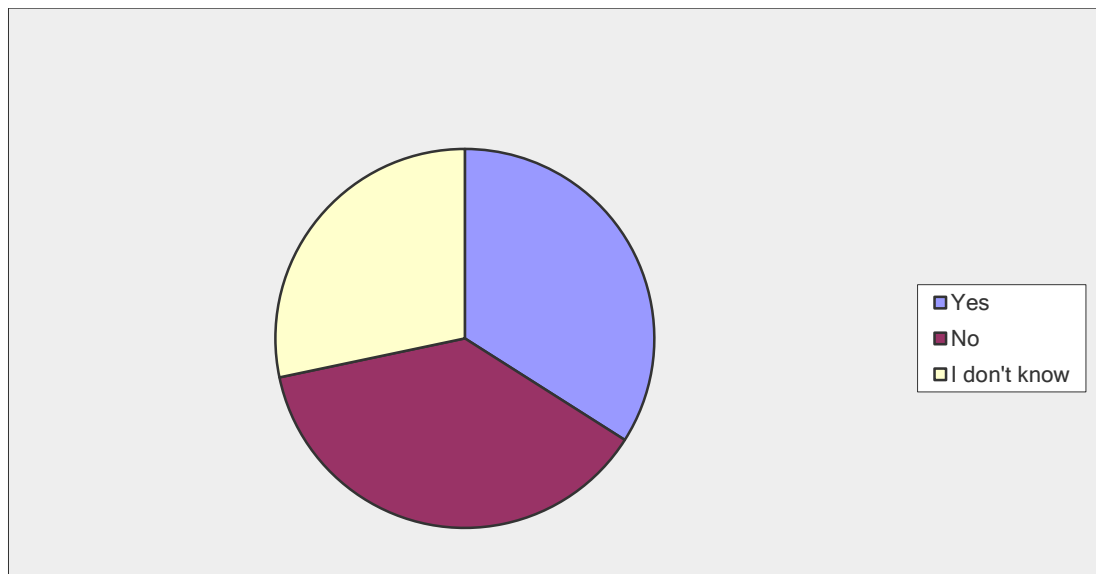
**Figure 16: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'What should be the nature of university/employer collaboration?' (n = 53 respondents)**



In the survey, students were asked if they had any concerns regarding employer involvement in degree course development and delivery (see Figure 17). The responses were fairly evenly spread with 37.7% of students saying that they did

not have any concerns, 34% saying that they did and 28.3% saying that they did not know.

**Figure 17: Results of Questionnaire Feedback from Students to the Following Question: 'Do you have any concerns regarding greater employer involvement in degree course development and delivery?' (n = 53 respondents)**



Students were given the opportunity to add comments. Some students did not express any concerns and felt that the closer interactions between higher education and industry could only enhance graduate employability:

*'As the basic principle behind university is to prepare students for later life, this is not a concern to me.'*

*'Makes the degree valuable and usable'*

*'An employer wants an outstanding deliverable to specific standards and have specific deadlines just like the industry. We should be trained to do this too.'*

*'It would help the course stay up to date and be in touch with the employers who are, at the end day, providing jobs to the students.'*

*'As long as the course is focused on a good number of employers then it will benefit the students'*

Some students highlighted that it is crucial how such interactions are manifested. In particular, the point was made that industry professionals are not necessarily good teachers; whilst employers should have an influence this should be at *'arm's length'*.

Students raised concerns that echo the philosophical debate as to the purpose of a university education and expressed concern over courses becoming too narrow:

*'I believe that greater involvement of employers in higher education will make universities a place where you are sculptured to go and work while universities should be a place where knowledge is given and student decides what to do with it and what is beneficial for his future.'*

*'I think the course should help you learn, not train you for a specific job.'*

Some students raised concerns over too much influence on courses from particular employers. Individuals from particular companies may be biased in their views or may have a particular approach within their organisation which



may be deemed incorrect elsewhere, which may mean that students are put at a disadvantage in the wider jobs market.

The Precarious Workers Brigade and Carrot Workers Collective (2014) highlighted that the cynical exploitation of young workers as cheap or free labour is particularly rife in the creative sector as individuals seek to gain experience and develop industry networks in this highly competitive sector. Feedback from a student for this study illustrated this concern:

*'I feel as though some placement years are being treated as free labour, the same companies, often small, hiring the same position year in year out, how do they have room for that expansion if they were to take on a previous placement worker?'*

An employer stated that his company was not currently offering apprenticeships at present as they were too busy to pursue such a scheme. Another employer considered the notion of apprenticeships and argued that there was potential for development in this area through the greater involvement of universities.

Further barriers to collaboration were highlighted by employers, academics and individuals working at policy level. The review of literature highlighted that cultural differences between higher education and industry were a key barrier for closer collaboration (Hogarth et al., 2007; Lambert, 2003; Wedgwood, 2008;

Wilson, 2012). Feedback from this study highlighted the issue of reticence from some academics to engage with industry as they may have no experience of the culture of the commercial workplace. A senior university manager highlighted cultural divisions:

*'But I think that one of the problems is that higher education has a sort of ... you mention 'employers', and suddenly sometimes people glaze over, as if it's a category of person they don't usually come across, not unusually, because most of us in higher education, that's what we've done. You know, we've not worked for Mars, or we've not worked for Pepsi-Cola. You know, we've done jobs in education, and so we've not accustomed to this group of people, and also we've not accustomed to what their values, what their perceptions are, and all of that.'*

(Policy Level 6, university  
management, national bodies)

Negative perceptions of higher education within companies were also noted as a possible obstacle:

*'[...] And there's often a tendency to see HE as this passive kind of blob out there that just needs to sort itself out, and then industry will benefit.'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

Another individual working at policy level with a background in graduate recruitment also highlighted cultural differences and in particular language barriers; the vernacular of higher education can seem impenetrable to those coming from industry.

One employer discussed his ideas for a more effective process by which universities and companies consider the scope of their involvement in such partnerships. He advocated a process whereby universities could compete for the involvement of particular companies with their institution. Employers could base their decision as to which universities were worthy of the investment of time and resources based on their professionalism, approach and facilities. Part of this process should include a consideration of the health and safety track record of the company. He stated that in his experience universities do not place the appropriate level of importance on investigating health and safety procedures present within companies that they may be looking to work more closely with in terms of site visits and work experience/placement opportunities.

An individual from an industry skills body contended that greater interaction between business and higher education could help to break down possible misconceptions. In his experience, when companies engage with universities through facilitating guest lectures or workshops they tend to have a more positive attitude towards higher education. He felt that it was companies that

choose not to engage with HEIs that tend to have negative preconceptions of universities.

Employers were keen to suggest ways in which such collaborations could be enhanced. One individual who works for a national broadcaster suggested that there was potential for more engagement through employers contributing to course development through their own training departments which could also feed into contracts for the company to provide some of that training.

Employers were supportive of company involvement in the development of live briefs and the opportunities for alumni to feed into this process. An employer from an SME in the broadcast sector thought that this part of the industry would benefit from '*the equivalent of a science park*', which would act as an incubator for undergraduates and postgraduates as they collaborate on projects with industry.

An employer who is also an academic also highlighted issues around time constraints as a disincentive for employers. A university manager echoed the same sentiment:

*'[...] we were talking about SMEs ... you know, they just do not have the time, and some of them have never thought about taking a graduate ... employing a graduate. It's living hand-to-mouth. [...] So, yes, you do need to broker. And, yes, I think there are enormous overheads. It's tough.'*

*Employers can't afford to do anything that isn't relevant to the organisation, or helping the organisation [...].'*

(Policy Level 8, university  
management)

Another employer also noted that for small companies the focus is on the survival of the business and that nurturing relationships with universities may be perceived as a distraction. However he also reflected on his desire to educate the next generation:

*'[...] I feel almost a moral obligation towards giving back. [...]... I don't want to stop being a practitioner, but I do want to be able to contribute, give back, some of my .... because I get stuff from that, as well. This is not a one-way street.'*

(Employer 13, broadcast  
industry, SME)

An employer highlighted key issues related to issues around the human resources required to support interactions with higher education. Considering the issues from the position of a company that specialises in delivering sound reinforcement for live events he underlined that in a highly competitive business environment the focus for a company is on pursuing, securing and delivering a high quality service for clients and making a profit for the company. Reflecting the findings of Hogarth et al. (2007) companies need to recruit

individuals with specific skills and that working more closely with universities may help to facilitate this. However, this employer stated that whilst the company offers support to particular universities where they can, they do not actively pursue such interactions. Ultimately, the imperative is not necessarily apparent for companies to invest time and resources on proactively seeking partnerships with universities when companies are able to recruit the talent that they require without pursuing such initiatives:

*'I don't think a lot of industries at the moment can afford to invest heavily any manpower in higher education, because it's almost not our problem yet. [...] what's the benefit for the employer? Because in the employer's eyes, we'll always get by. We'll always find the guy, we'll always struggle through. So I think it's difficult to quantify, because it costs money to invest time, even, in higher education.'*

(Employer 9, live events  
sound specialists)

This employer also highlighted the issue of choosing which university to partner with: should they engage with a local university because it is more convenient even if not necessarily the best in terms of reputation? If a company decides to look further afield it may be difficult to ascertain which universities to focus on out of the many Music Technology-oriented courses that are available. Furthermore, he expressed concern over the management of student expectations in terms of the possibility of being able to secure a position with

the company. Companies that work closely with universities, perhaps endorsing particular courses may give the impression to students of a direct route to employment in the sector which is not actually be the case. In order to address this he advocated greater cohesion between the commercial sector and HEIs.

One employer highlighted the limited resources that companies have at their disposal to support collaboration and in line with the findings of Lowden et al. (2011) is of the opinion that the onus is on universities to pursue relationships with employers:

*'So there's almost a strainer which needs to be in place which kind of allows the experience of employers to be devolved or granted to the universities, so they can draw on it and see where the opportunities are. But it's the responsibility of the educationalists to place the students in a position where they can get jobs. It's not the position of the employers. Therefore the universities have to reach out. It can't be the employers coming in to the university. It has to be the universities going out to the employers. [...]*

(Employer 10, specialist  
support for live events)

Another employer summarised the approach at his company towards recruitment: the company needs to source the best talent that they can, whether that individual has come through a university experience or not. As a small

company with only an occasional need to take on new staff they do not have time to spend on nurturing links with HEIs that may or may not result in a tangible benefit to the company. This lack of evidence of benefits to business reflects the findings of Lambert (2003).

Interviewees were asked how relationships between employers and universities could best be brokered. Employers were positive about the role of brokers in nurturing these relationships:

*'I think there is a role for brokers, [...] I think the forming of a proposition that is of mutual benefit does actually take some work. It has to be dynamic, it has to be very flexible, and I think you should expect it to change. But the idea that there is an interstitial between ... that just breaks down that standoff.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast  
industry, SME)

This employer felt that companies can be too dismissive of graduates and could become more proactive in their engagement with universities which may help to ensure that the graduates that come through the system have the skills that they require. He thought that knowledgeable brokerage could be useful in terms of addressing the needs of companies and HEIs. Such support would include an awareness of the working practices of both parties. The potential for brokerage to act as a bridge for more effective engagement between HEIs and employers



was recognised by Hogarth et al. (2007) and CBI (2013). One of the problems that the employer envisaged is that such relationships would take time to develop and employers may need to see a faster return on their investment of resources. In his experience companies are more open to such initiatives when business is quiet but will lose focus in this area during busy times. He acknowledged that this scenario could be self-defeating as involvement may be lost at a point that demonstrates the need for continued involvement. He also highlighted that employers would be sensitive to being used by universities to support course marketing or metrics; mutual respect and benefit is crucial to the success of such schemes:

*'So I think the idea that you're always looking for more partners, you're always looking for opportunities to develop is a good message to get out there, and as long as the return for the companies is a good one, as I say, at that point the community will take over. It's tricky, though, because people are quite cynical. You know, it is a matter of overcoming cynicism.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast industry, SME)

Another employer from an SME in the broadcast industry considered the fragmented nature of the sector. He contended that whilst higher education can be seen to have centrally-derived policy, the broadcast sector does not have a unifying body as it did in the past through trade bodies. A university manager highlighted the issue of working with a diverse group of SMEs:

*'[...] it's quite difficult to talk to representative employers and for them to be representative of the whole general .... And I think they're very, very focused on their needs.'*

(Policy Level 8, university  
management)

An employer who also works as an academic also acknowledged the problem. Small companies may lack the resources to allow for engagement with universities and so will not have the opportunity to contribute to curriculum design. He also felt that the onus was on universities to proactively pursue relationships with industrial partners. He thought that a form of trade body would be a useful conduit through which smaller companies could contribute to the curriculum of a university.

Mirroring the findings of Hogarth et al. (2007), one managing director thought that employers could be more proactive in terms of instigating engagement with HEIs.

An individual working at a policy level for a network organisation echoed the same sentiment that SMEs tend to be under-represented, in part because of their size but also because they can be transient whilst a small number of long-established, larger organisations may tend to dominate. The key to achieving better representation is through nurturing communities:

*'[...] it's about building connections; it's about building a community. It isn't a real community, because the employers won't necessarily talk to one another, because they might be in competition. But it is about connecting with the companies, and thinking about the routes into those.'*

(Policy Level 3, network  
organisation)

A manager in a university also acknowledged this imbalance. Research that she had been involved with demonstrates that the voice of larger organisations tends to dominate in the development of policy. Whilst there is no single organisation that can be said to represent the diverse range of SMEs, policy makers have a duty to listen to their feedback:

*'[...] in terms of how best they can be heard, they're very heterogeneous, so there isn't one organisation that can speak for them. But on the other hand, first of all you'd have to have a real commitment on government's part to listen. I think the listening's the main thing, and I'm not convinced that's there at all.'*

(Policy Level 4, university  
management)

Another individual working at a policy level also highlighted the diversity across employers but also raised issues regarding the sharing of information regarding employer links within a particular university. Academics may

jealously guard their industrial contacts and not necessarily wish to share them with colleagues.

Not only is information not necessarily being shared within a university, an employer noted that competition between universities is a disincentive for collaboration across the HE sector as universities seek to engage with business and this can be detrimental. An individual working at a policy level for an industry skills body spoke of his experience of trying to support strategic alliances between universities: whilst it worked well on occasion, organisations could not be obliged to participate. Government policy continues to be focused on competition as a means of improving standards and momentum in this direction will continue as higher education provision is opened up to more providers. Jo Johnson MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science stated:

*'We will make it quicker and easier for new high quality challenger institutions to enter the market and award their own degrees. A new Office for Students will put competition and choice at the heart of sector regulation [...]*

(BIS, 2016, p.6)

The consequence of this environment is that employers can receive requests for closer engagement from multiple universities which may lead to '*employer fatigue*'. In the face of such a burden, companies may become disengaged with

higher education or may choose to limit their involvement to a particular organisation:

*'[...] there's a famous animation company who's doing that at the moment, and I think it may be detrimental to them in the end, but they're saying, no, we're only dealing with our local university. We don't care that you're brilliant over there, we're just going to have a relationship with our own local university, and we're going to help them to build their curriculum.'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

However, in the context of Music Technology-oriented degree courses, data gathered from employers for this survey would suggest that they are not currently overburdened with requests for collaboration from universities. Reflecting the findings of Lowden et al. (2011) employers spoke of little or no contact with universities and being ignored when they had made contact with an institution. Reflecting the findings of Lambert (2003) that universities can appear impenetrable, employers also spoke of difficulties in navigating through the hierarchical organisational structures within universities.

An employer commented on the difficulties in instigating a conversation with a university. From an employer's perspective it is not easy to know where to start or who to speak to. Once this has been overcome and a relationship has been

established it is not always clear as to the benefits of such engagement for an employer.

An individual who works for an industry skills body had experience of employer impatience. An employer may try contacting a local college perhaps and may struggle to locate or engage with the right person there and will give up.

An individual working at policy level within a university commented on the need for brokerage between industry and higher education. In her experience, she had witnessed barriers to communication:

*'[...] when you've got someone who's very theoretically-based ... you know, and I've worked with some from @@an elite UK university##, for instance, who've got amazing breakthrough technologies, but have got no idea how to talk to other people about them, and in fact certainly no idea how they might be applied. And getting them and a finance person in the same room is a nightmare, let alone getting a business person. So I think there is a real place for brokerage, and that's become much more commonly accepted.'*

(Policy Level 4, university  
management)

Echoing the assertion of Hogarth et al. (2007), that intermediaries can help companies to articulate their requirements to HEIs, an employer from an SME in the broadcast sector reflected on his experience of acting as an informal

broker between higher education and his community of small businesses. In his experience when micro-businesses encounter a problem they can struggle to find individuals that can support them. An organisation that represents such a community may be able to work through issues on behalf of such companies but he acknowledged that it was very difficult to find solutions; moreover individuals from such companies have very limited patience if they do not perceive tangible results fairly quickly:

*'You can get people involved the first time. They will need to know the things that are happening the second time. If they haven't by that, you won't get to the third day. They'll just say, well, it isn't moving fast enough. We're busy now.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast  
industry, SME)

The review of literature highlighted the importance of informal partnerships between universities and employers (Lambert, 2007). In this study, employers highlighted the value of informal interactions and face to face discussions. Flexibility was highlighted as being important by one employer and he emphasised the importance of personal interactions and relationships over policy-driven strategies which can be too prescriptive. In contrast, a representative of an industry skills body focused on the potential of web-based communication channels. Whilst it can be seen that such online communication is more cost efficient, from the perspective of employers there is the potential

for such interactions to become marginalised in an over-saturated online communication environment. Furthermore, the development of such relationships may be perceived as superfluous compared to satisfying the needs of customers and this may be another barrier to establishing on-going interactions. Whilst individual personal relationships based on on-going dialogue seem to underpin successful partnerships between particular companies and universities, the dangers of over-reliance on such one-to-one relationships between individuals as noted by Hogarth et al. (2007) were highlighted in the data collected for this study.

An individual working at policy level contended that in his experience SMEs were starting to work more closely together in their dealings with higher education. He envisaged that this process of collectivisation will continue out of which will emerge conduits through which the views of a disparate group of companies can be represented collectively to universities.

One employer highlighted how the language and culture of higher education can be off-putting to employers. When asked about how relationships between employers and universities could best be brokered he responded:

*'Sorry but the wording of that question makes my skin curl. That is bureaucrat speak, yeah? Like, again and I speak the language, I get what they're saying and I can write like that too, like this whole process and how you broker it, 'partnerships', all these words. [...] pick up the phone, get two*



*decent intelligent human beings who get it to have a chat and if you want to put that down as a policy that's fine.'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

A senior university manager emphasised the importance of personal interaction when commenting on her experience of building new relationships with employers. The approach taken by her institution was that they would need to proactively seek out industrial partners. In doing so they would need to be mindful of the needs of employers: to arrange meetings at times that would suit employers, typically in the early morning and to look after the guests with refreshments when they came in to the university for meetings. Flexibility and a determination to support the needs of employers was seen to be vital even if this did mean multiple meetings in order to facilitate wider engagement from employers.

Students were also very positive about systems that could support more informal interactions with industry representatives. For instance, students felt that it would be beneficial for networking events to be structured in such a way as to guide students who may need support in order to fully benefit from such experiences.

Wedgewood (2008) wrote of a new environment borne out of a cultural shift whereby the expectation is that higher education and employers work more

closely together. The feedback of this study would suggest that in general students are supportive of such an evolution, although concerns were expressed regarding universities working too closely with particular companies which may lead to courses becoming too narrow.

Another individual working at policy level acknowledged the limits of employer liaison/advisory groups. In his experience such high level discussions are designed for efficiency for any of the participants but may lack the level of detail that might be useful on a practical level. However, the administrative burden to cascade this down to all faculties, departments and programmes may be prohibitive.

All stakeholders were asked to consider their awareness of any initiatives or organisations that are focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers. Overall, amongst students and employers there is a general lack of awareness of initiatives or organisations that are focused on supporting greater collaboration between universities and graduate employers, this was highlighted by an individual working at policy level:

*'[...] it absolutely matters, because that's meant to be a quality mark, and meant to be a mark of relevance for that particular industry. So if employers aren't aware of it, and students aren't aware of it, then it's meaningless.'*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)

73% of students surveyed (39 students) were not aware of any initiatives or organisations that are focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers.

A senior university manager was asked: Do you think that employers are sufficiently aware of changes related to employability that have been rolled out across higher education?

*'They're confused by it. They're totally confused by it. Totally, totally confused. [...] it's very difficult to get the message out there, because each company is an individual [...] I think consultation with employers is really difficult for the same reason I've said before, because one employer is not representative. One big company doesn't represent, one small company doesn't.'*

(Policy Level 8, university  
management)

Another individual working at policy level on behalf of graduate employers was asked the same question and he acknowledged that as part of his role he was responsible for raising awareness. In his experience he had witnessed a cultural

shift whereby higher managers in universities are now much more engaged with supporting industrial engagement. He alluded to the development of various initiatives within universities, whether *'bolt-on'* approaches or more embedded methodologies as evidence of the enhancement of the support for graduate employability. He spoke of urging the employers that his organisation represents to reconsider their preconceptions of higher education as the sector is rapidly evolving. He also underlined the importance of employers allocating resources to support these developments with the higher education sector rather than taking a more passive approach.

As a way of measuring awareness, students were asked if they had heard of one particular organisation that is focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers. In a focus group two students said that they had heard of this organisation but their responses contrasted:

M1 *'I made this my first choice because it was @@accredited by this organisation##, as far as I knew at the time. My second choice was @@also accredited by the same organisation##, only just because I just assumed if it was [...] approved, then it must be a pretty good course.'*

M6 *'Our course is supposed to be @@approved by this organisation##, so it's supposed to be a good course, and attracted all the people, now it's being cancelled. So, what is @@this organisation##, really? It's nothing.'*

(Students 3, second year)

Two employers mentioned that whilst they had heard of the same organisation they did not know anything about it. Similarly, none of the employers had heard of the Higher Education Achievement Report. An employer emphasised the need for a re-evaluation of approaches to engagement with employers. There needs to be a critique of channels of communication with employers as it is evident that current marketing methods are lacking penetration into industry.

Employers were asked for their suggestions as to how to raise awareness of initiatives such as this amongst employers. A representative from a company that manufactures audio products emphasised the importance of correspondence being directed at particular departments or individuals within a company as opposed to indiscriminate postings. The ideal approach would be to send a representative to the company but he acknowledged the huge overhead of such an approach.

One employer who was aware of a particular organisation that seeks to support the creative industries in the development of skills and talent stressed the importance of establishing the credibility of the scheme through initial interactions as employers would tend not to engage with such an organisation again if the benefits of engagement were not apparent fairly quickly:

*'Quite often when I @@mention this organisation to## people they say, oh, yes, we kind of looked at that some years ago, and there's not really anything in it for us. And there's almost a kind of ennui about the whole thing. You know, we kind of looked over there, and because it didn't do exactly what we needed to happen, we kind of lost the faith. So I think the awareness is actually pretty low. [...]'*

(Employer 11,  
broadcast industry,  
SME)

Conversely, if the strategy is right and there are tangible benefits for employers the initiative would gain natural momentum. The same employer highlighted the importance of word of mouth:

*'[...] that brokerage function isn't just about making conversations work, it's actually making sure that the things deliver, because once they've delivered, you can just light the blue touch paper and retire, and it will go. You know, if you've got it right, if you've designed something right, then you don't need to spend all your time telling people what you're doing. They will tell each other.'*

(Employer 11, broadcast  
industry, SME)

A representative from an organisation directly involved creating closer links between universities and graduate employers spoke of the importance of their website as means of engagement with employers. He went on to explain how the organisation was developing a new website that would offer content tailored to the needs of particular types of users:

*'[...] we're creating a very personalised website, where we're changing the website we have to one which is personalised to the user, [...] So, by knowing who's coming to the website, the website will show them more of what they want, and offer them things as well [...].'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

Respondents were asked for their suggestions as to how to raise awareness of initiatives or organisations that are focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers. Their responses emphasised the importance of personal interaction. Blanket 'spam' emails were dismissed as ineffective but updates from universities sent to particular individuals highlighting new developments were seen as worthwhile. One employer emphasised the importance of interactions borne out of a more personal approach:

*'I think it has to be a very [...] personal kind of approach, in that a direct email, or a direct dialogue with the director that clearly spells out what the*

*advantages would be for the company if they were to get involved with this kind of scheme, with effectively zero overhead for the company. [...] There should be little impact on the company, [...] There needs to be a recognisable goal at the end of it. You know, what we're going to achieve, what the organisation's going to supply in order to achieve that, and if all that's clear, and it's agreed between both parties then it can work, but it's a difficult thing to crack.'*

(Employer 8, recording studio owner and academic)

An employer recommended advertising in specialist trade magazines and having a presence at trade shows. An individual working at policy level highlighted the role of social media. A channel such as Twitter can offer the potential to disseminate information based on mutual interest and through this active engagement, the benefits of engagement with a particular initiative can be communicated.

An employer summed up the perspectives of employers currently over-saturated with information:

*'Send us a brochure, magazine - bin. Phone call, yeah? Well researched and thought out, we'd always take the call. Always.*

*[...] they need to think what value are we bringing to the employer? Why should I care? They need to ask themselves that question, in the same way*



*a business has to ask why should someone spend money with me? It's a pretty fundamental question most people can't answer. Why should I care?'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

An individual working at policy level for a network organisation offered a similar perspective and recommended that such organisations work closely with industry partners to develop their message and to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of employers. In this way more sophisticated and nuanced marketing campaigns can be developed.

A higher manager in a university also underlined the importance of working with employers in the development of strategies and the marketing of such strategies. Moreover, industry bodies and employers should be part of reflective discussions that consider the impact of such schemes.

#### **4.4.4.1 Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study link with established theory (Hogarth et al., 2007; Lambert, 2003; Wedgwood, 2008; Wilson, 2012) that cultural differences are a barrier to closer collaboration between industry and higher education.

Feedback from employers for this study would suggest that there is latent potential for the enhancement of collaboration between industry and academia.

Employers were enthusiastic at the mutual benefit of closer working partnerships for both parties. Innovative suggestions for further involvement came from employers rather than academics, individuals working at policy level and students.

Whilst employers expressed enthusiasm for collaboration they also emphasised the lack of contact that they had experienced from HEIs. Such a dichotomy would suggest that universities are not fully exploiting the potential of such relationships. The findings of this study would suggest that one of the reasons for this could be cultural differences between academia and industry. Such reticence can be addressed through long term on-going engagement through activities such as providing training within companies or academic staff taking industrial sabbaticals. Likewise, typical interactions such as placements and guest lectures can be enhanced through representatives from companies facilitating workshop-based training to students and academic staff at universities, joint research projects and product testing. Preconceptions and cultural barriers can be addressed through on-going engagement.

Crucially, these findings would suggest that although there is untapped potential, the onus is on HEIs to do more to engage with companies in the first instance. Universities can seem impenetrable to individuals from SMEs and the focus of web-based marketing for courses could be further enhanced to support and offer signposting to employers that may be looking to engage with a particular university.

The management of such relationships is an issue; small companies in particular do not have the time or resources to maintain multiple relationships with various universities. Employers that offered their feedback for this study did not have experience of engaging with organisations created to support such brokerage. However, employers were enthusiastic about the potential benefits of such support systems although barriers were apparent in terms of jealously guarded contacts, the competitive environment, cultural differences and preconceptions on both sides.

Supply and demand can be another barrier to closer engagement. If employers are currently able to source the talent that they need without investing time and resources in nurturing closer links with HEIs there is no incentive to pursue new partnerships. As part of a strategy of more proactive engagement, universities need to highlight the wider benefits of engagement such as offering companies access to specialist resources and potential joint research projects.

Whilst students are also positive about the benefits of closer collaboration they were mindful of the potential for the views of particular employers to dominate which may lead to a narrowing of the scope of the course. Course teams need to be transparent in the communication of the nature of their relationships with industrial partners with students. Students can be cynical of such partnerships and in particular the potential of such collaboration to be based on the exploitation of cheap labour.

As highlighted by Jongbloed et al. (2008) stakeholder management is crucial in this dynamic environment where external organisations are having an impact on the direction and content of courses (see page 89). They highlight that universities are now required to engage in on-going dialogue with a range of stakeholders. Such interactions require coordination and accountability mechanisms as universities are obliged to:

*'[...] demonstrate quality, efficiency and effectiveness, not just to those in national administration which have the legal and historic responsibility for exercising official oversight, but increasingly so to a wider range of stakeholders.'*

(Jongbloed et al., 2008, p.306-7)

Whilst the theory would suggest that there is a greater emphasis on enhancing links between higher education and industry than ever before (Wilson, 2012; Hogarth, 2007; Wedgewood, 2008), the findings of this study offers new insight into difficulties in terms of raising awareness of schemes designed to support such interactions. Feedback gathered through this study would suggest that careful consideration needs to be given to the approach to the marketing of such initiatives.

#### **4.4.5 Practical approaches, technologies and environments to support collaboration between students, academics and employers for the enhancement of graduate employability**

The HEA (2012) stated that:

*‘There should be a focus on researching effective strategies to engage employers.’*

(HEA, 2012, p.5)

The findings of this study would suggest that routes of communication between employers and universities have great potential for enhancement. Wilson (2012) and Lowden et al. (2011) stated that barriers to greater interaction between companies and universities are rooted in cultural differences.

Overall, the key findings from the different stakeholders focused on the need to bridge such cultural differences, the importance of sensitivity to the needs of different groups of stakeholders and building on individual, one-to-one informal relationships. The partnerships need to be credible and offer on-going, mutual benefits.

Cultural differences across the range of stakeholders can undermine good intentions related to schemes designed to facilitate greater interaction. When

evaluating practical approaches that will facilitate collaboration across stakeholder groups existing barriers need to be considered:

*'I'm on a number of national groups [...], trying to coordinate stakeholders, [...]. We're finding it difficult to get a common voice from each of the stakeholders. We're finding it difficult to speak a language that we all understand. The lobby groups are very strong at the moment. Government policy is very short-term, when education's about the long-term. I think the students' relationship with universities is very different. This transactional relationship, why do you go to university? You are buying a commodity. [...] Students as customers. And so, to be able to say, come to university, and you'll get a good job. That's quite an easy thing ... you know, it's a nice thing to say. Come to university and take on more responsibility, that's more difficult. So you're paying more money, and yet we want more off you. You've got to give yourself. So I would say to the students, you're not the customer, you're the product. What you're buying is an opportunity to put in something yourself.'*

(Policy Level 8, university  
management)

In terms of support for networking activities, those working at policy level and employers acknowledged the value of local chambers of commerce and federations. One employer emphasised the brokerage role of trade bodies. An individual working at policy level in graduate recruitment highlighted the

importance of the bodies such as Chambers of Commerce, the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, Institute of Directors and employer bodies like AGR (Association of Graduate Recruiters).

He contended that universities could be more proactive in their outreach to industry and that there can be tensions between academia and industry with each perceiving that the other is using them unfairly.

An employer from a theatre thought that interested parties should make better use of bodies that already exist rather than creating new ones. In particular, he argued that through more proactive engagement, Chambers of Commerce could offer greater networking potential. He voiced a note of caution however: universities should be mindful not to oversell to companies. Relationships need to be based on shared experience and mutually beneficial networks.

The Wilson Review (2012) noted that many business organisations such as the CBI and Chambers of Commerce whilst recognising the importance of addressing issues around SME/university interaction, do not have the breadth of coverage required to support such collaboration. However, the Review saw LEPs (Local Enterprise Partnerships) as having the potential to facilitate such interactions. As can be seen from the agencies highlighted by employers, LEPs were not mentioned in discussions held for this study.

Another employer mentioned the importance of particular societies such as the AS (Acoustical Society) and the IOA (Institute of Acoustics). He mentioned that he joined the IOA as a student and found their events very useful in terms of networking with academics and employers. He also found it useful as a way of learning about potential career paths. He did note however that enrolment fees for bodies such as this can serve as a disincentive for students.

Another comment from an individual working at policy level highlighted the need for Universities to make themselves visible to industry and to be proactive generally in their dealings with industry. Trade conferences can offer the potential for universities to engage with industry. He encouraged the free dissemination of research material as way of giving something of value to industry as a potential catalyst for future involvement:

*'So I think being able to find out where industry goes, and go there, and be part of that landscape kind of like by stealth ... you know, once industry sees you not as a tutor, but as a facilitator for training, that's sometimes a really useful tactic.'*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

One interviewee, a senior manager in a university, highlighted the importance of individual relationships between company representatives and academics but also noted the weaknesses of this approach. She reflected on her experience



of managing a process of change in the university borne out of a strategy for pooling industry contacts. Placements contacts have now been centralised and although there was reticence from the different departments to share relationships that had been developed over many years, she contended that the outcome had been very successful. The advantage of bringing this data together is the potential to cross-sell to other universities. The process of managing such processes can be problematic however:

*'[...] one of the problems is that it's all about individuals. So, we talk about the companies, but it's all dependent on, you have a really good link with the company, and then they move on. So how one can formalise a process which doesn't involve these individuals? That's the problem. [...] They're really difficult to run. They're quite problematic. [...] I'm on the university council here, and there are all these lay members from business, and people, and it's really difficult to get them involved.'*

(Policy Level 8, university  
management)

One interviewee who was both a lecturer and owner of a studio where he engaged placement students to work with clients emphasised the importance of on-going dialogue. He alluded to direct dialogue with individuals from companies as a means of investigating the skills that they require. Whilst such feedback needs to be considered in the wider context of the programme, such feedback can lead to adjustments to the curriculum:

*'For example, now we're moving towards doing the embedded audio type work, because of the explosion in that area [...] there certainly needs to be open dialogue, and lots of it, and we need to make sure that, for the time that the students are here, or at the university, you know ... I want to know as an employer, if you come and work for me, that you're going to hit the floor running, and that you've got all the skills I need, and more. And from the university point of view, they've got to be sure that they're fulfilling those employer needs.'*

(Employer 8, recording studio  
owner and academic)

A senior manager in a university reflected on how a strategic priority for her university to reach out to industry translated into proactive engagement. The interviewee highlighted the importance of having a clear purpose which can be understood by all stakeholders. In this instance, university leaders met with local employers through business summits via the Chamber of Commerce in order to explore new ways in which the university and employers could connect. The summits involved representatives from local employers, typically SMEs, as well as representatives from larger private and public organisations. The outcome of these interactions was a mutual desire to work more closely together in the development of curricula, the provision of work placements and routes into graduate employment. The approach of this manager was to work closely with key senior academics and to ensure that the events involved more external partners than academic staff:

*'I think what you have to do for external partners, employers or otherwise ... [...] you've got to build the partnership first, and you've got to have a common sense of what you're trying to do. Those are real deliverables, because otherwise it can just become a ... it's all very nice, thank you, having a cup of tea and a biscuit, and talking about how things should be, or how you want them to be, but I think you've got to take it to something that's a bit more tangible.'*

(Policy Level 7, university  
management)

She emphasised the importance of clarity in terms of the areas of engagement for the external parties, there needs to be a focus, priorities need to be negotiated; the process requires patience:

*[...] the purpose is to ... to me, has always been about having an external critical friend, to ensure that the curriculum is contemporary, that we're developing the right knowledge, and skill set, and values and behaviours, particularly importantly, for graduates to be successful in a ... competing and challenging employment sector, and actually wanting external stakeholders to get involved at the curriculum design stage, potentially recruiting students, potentially assessing students, as well as providing work placements. And I think it's that mutuality, or that reciprocity of respect that has meant, to be honest, I've never had any problems doing it.*

(ibid.)

In her experience such a holistic approach is welcomed by the students; the involvement of external stakeholders can enhance the credibility of the course in the perceptions of students and this can lead to greater engagement.

Another interviewee also working at policy level noted that there needs to be the potential for mutual benefit, perhaps through employers and academics perceiving a skills gap and devising a plan to address this need. He noted that such collaborations could be virtual as well as physical. He did note that issues persist however:

*'I think it's strange, because in this era of connectivity, there's very few barriers to actually having those kind of groups set up if they're based around real need. But the tribes still aren't speaking very well.*

(Policy Level 1, industry skills  
body)

Another individual working at a policy level acknowledged the potential of technology to support engagement between academia and industry. Drawing on her experience of the building of a database of labour market information she discussed how the use of new technology had changed working practices. Reflecting on working with an external provider in the development of this project she highlighted that the technology facilitated more immediate interaction:

*'And it was an environment where ... it was actually very organised, but not in a kind of linear project management type way. So it always felt like the project was in control ... like, they were in control of it, we knew what was going on, but it was more kind of ... fast paced, a bit more dynamic, and I think we had a better input into the development of that than we have in some of our other projects. [...] the technology that was used I think could be used with any group, really, [...] sometimes it's easier to use something like that than it is to get people together for a meeting.*

(Policy Level 2, publicly  
funded, industry-led  
organisation)

Another individual working at a policy level highlighted the potential of technology in the facilitation of interactions between employers, academics and students. Virtual engagement may serve to reduce barriers to involvement from industry professionals as the impact on the time required for physical visits to universities can be reduced.

An employer, whilst acknowledging the value of virtual communications such as video conferencing, emphasised that this needs to be underpinned by physical interaction between stakeholders. Another employer stated:

*'[...] you know, you can't beat that face-to-face dialogue. [...] So, yes, me personally is, yes, video conferencing, group conferencing, not that ideal,*

*really. Maybe as a follow-up? Again, if people are a bit short of time? [...] you need to nurture the personal relationship in a very rich way, initially. Then you can maybe get away with some of the other stuff. But just jumping in with some of those things, I don't think it works.'*

(Employer 5, audio products manufacturer)

Echoing the findings of Hogarth et al. (2007) another interviewee, a senior manager within a university, stressed the importance of finding a range of ways for universities to interact with industry. He noted that small companies may operate in a different way to larger organisations and it is important not to restrict the involvement certain groups through only following one approach.

This notion of variety in approaches to interaction was supported by an employer from an audio products manufacturer. He acknowledged that such variation is beneficial in terms of managing the human resources involved in such interactions and because different approaches would allow students to gain insight in different areas perhaps through workshops.

A manager in a university stated that in her experience employers were keen to share their skills and that typically they want to *'give something back'*:

*'[...] engagement is not an issue. They want to engage with students, they want to make a difference, and they want to see students employed, many*

*of them ... you know, because they remember their own experience ... and also because they've got kids.'*

(Policy Level 4, university  
management)

Suggestions from academics highlighted the importance of a tailored approach to building relationships with industry and the benefits of flexibility and informality.

Academic staff at another university reflected on the development of their recently established industrial advisory group. The catalysts for this initiative came from an accrediting body and the senior manager of the department. An academic stated that in his experience of such committees, employers emphasise the importance of softer skills. The academic said that he found the meetings boring and wondered why employers would want to invest their time in such consultations. Aside from the potential to supply employers with graduates or placement students, the academic did not perceive of any benefit for employers in engagement with such events.

The academics reflected that the logistics of such meetings meant that groups of courses and their relative industrial partners are brought together for industrial advisory groups. The result of this arrangement is that large parts of the meeting are of little interest to particular groups. However, many more

meetings would need to be scheduled in order to facilitate more specialised discussion between particular courses and employers.

An employer from the broadcast industry emphasised the need for partnerships to be developed out of teamwork. The importance of informality and momentum was stressed. He advocated an agile approach to the management of the project of engagement. Goals that resonate across the whole group need to be established and he argued that students should be part of this developmental process:

*'Maybe there could be some kind of event where these smaller companies were invited down, like ... I'm not sure, just like a get-together of some kind, where they could say, right, OK, well we'll put that afternoon aside that day, and then they could maybe do a lot of things in one afternoon, and maybe get to meet students, and get to tell people about what it is they do. Maybe have a little stall there, or something.'*

(Employer 3, audio products manufacturer)

Other employers also recommended an informal approach and highlighted the importance of the context in which the discussions take place. One employer suggested an event that focused on interactions between students and SMEs, another highlighted that such events not only offer opportunities for



universities to interact with industry but for representatives from different commercial organisations, including competitors, to interact:

*'[...] this sounds bad but we all love a golf day we all love free food, we all love them. Some beer, make it a fun day and also you know what? People like me love catching up with our rivals, it's good fun. [...] Organise a nice lunch at the university, get all the bosses of all the companies to come round and we love a bit of that, bit of banter, a bit of rivalry, it's good fun [...] We're gonna talk in a roundtable discussion about industry and commercial related issues and talk about it. You adjudicate the session [...] Have an auditorium with the kids sitting round the outside. [...] The kids get a feel for how our brains work, what we think and then you open it to the floor and they can ask questions. I would love to could come to something like that. I think a lot of other industry people would as well.'*

(Employer 14, live events  
production)

A similar approach was recommended by an individual working at policy level who highlighted the importance of targeted, appropriate marketing, which is followed up on. She highlighted the importance of making guests feel welcome and sharing the outcomes of such meetings via university newsletters and on websites. Industry partners would be encouraged to include such material on their websites and in this way the scope of the industry network expands naturally as more companies become aware of the initiative.

Informality was also supported by students who perceived a group discussion as an alternative to *'being talked at'*. Students thought smaller groups would be more conducive to open discussions. An employer underlined the importance of sharing experience:

*'[...] ... it's all about telling stories. I think stories count for so much in this industry. [...] And I think if a student can see it's all about the pathway ... you know, I did this, I did that, and now I'm doing this, [...]*

(Employer 1, live events  
sound specialists)

One employer highlighted employer-led workshops as another opportunity for interaction. He suggested regular engagement with practitioners who could share their passion for a craft. He was confident that practitioners would be keen to share their skills in this way although he acknowledged that they may be daunted at the prospect of teaching in a university, particularly those who had not been through a degree course themselves.

In forum discussions feedback from students indicated that they value a structured approach networking events. The particular rooms being used to stage an event, the size of the groups at tables, the need for an interesting guest speaker and opportunities for informal discussion were all crucial in terms of allowing students to feel confident and able to engage with discussions with industry professionals. This structure and environment allowed for bridging

across different backgrounds and levels of experience. One student discussed an event that he attended in London:

*'So you basically have ... the community website that would host the events. They do, like, pizzas, and drinks, and they'll have a topic, and have a speaker come in to talk about an app, or a subject, or something, and everyone would be round in a circle, and it was people talking from all sorts of areas, whether it was banking, or recruiters, or anything. [...] it was fantastic. [...] And then afterwards it would be, let's get a drink, and let's go to the pub, and continue.'*

(Students 1, final year, ex-  
placements)

Students do not necessarily feel that they need to be directly involved in course-related discussions between the university and employers. In a forum discussion, a small group of students indicated that students cannot necessarily see the wider context and would tend to complain about resources and module content:

*'I don't think the students are qualified to say what is needed in the industry, or what they want. It's not about what they want, it's about what the industry wants.'*

(Students 2, final year)

#### **4.4.5.1 Implications of Findings**

The Lambert Review (2003) espoused the virtues of informal interactions between industry and academia. Evidence gathered from across the stakeholder groups through this research provides new insight into approaches for such interactions and the benefits for both academia and industry in the context of this particular course type.

The findings of this study highlight the continued need for external support in order to fully exploit the potential for employer/university engagement. Whilst various bodies are mentioned, it is apparent that no one body is recognised by all parties as the conduit for interaction.

The issue of reticence in the sharing of industrial contacts across HEIs can again mean that possibilities to maximise the potential for engagement may be constrained. There is evidence that moves within particular institutions to require the sharing of such data can be beneficial and perhaps this trend may become more prevalent across the sector as market forces place increasing pressures on HEIs to enhance industrial partnerships.

Whilst technology can support collaboration, feedback across all stakeholder groups would suggest that deeper engagement can only be possible through physical engagement. Furthermore, informal interactions were perceived as particularly valuable by all stakeholder groups. Such informal interactions need to be carefully planned and managed in order to capitalise on the potential for

engagement and interaction by all parties. For instance, students may feel reticent to ask questions in a larger formal atmosphere but may be able to engage more fully in smaller group contexts. Whilst employers may engage in discussions with academics they would also be stimulated by debating with competitors in their sector.

#### **4.5 Summary of Findings**

The themes that emerged from the Literature Review were investigated in the particular context of BSc Music Technology-oriented degree courses. These findings offer an insight into the perspectives of individuals drawn from the 4 stakeholder groups: individuals working at a policy level, academics, students and employers. The data gathered from interviews, focus groups and a survey was analysed and emergent themes highlighted. The analysis of this material offers insight into the perspectives of these stakeholder groups at a particular point in the evolution of higher education in the UK. Overall, it can be seen that whilst there is evident overlap in the perspectives presented, there are key areas where there is a divergence of views. This lack of alignment is indicative of a disconnect that serves to undermine efforts to enhance graduate employability.

In Chapter 5 the key research questions will be revisited and the insight gained from this study will be highlighted and the implications will be considered.

## **CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The final chapter considers the implications of differing stakeholder perceptions around the enhancement of graduate employability. The aim, main research questions and methodology will be revisited and significant findings highlighted. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the stakeholders and suggestions for further research.

The purpose of this piece of research was to explore the enhancement of graduate employability, focusing on a study of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy. This was achieved by the gathering of rich qualitative data from key stakeholder groups: individuals working at policy level, employers, academics and students.

The key research questions were:

- What is understood by graduate employability? To what extent do all stakeholders have a common understanding of the term?
- What are stakeholder perceptions of university employability policy?
- How do stakeholders perceive the ways in which employability policy is translated into university strategy?

The research questions and the subsequent literature review informed the

development of a conceptual framework for the exploration of this area.

The requirement for universities to prepare students for graduate employment is not a new phenomenon and has been a focus of government-instigated policy since the 1960s (Robbins, 1963). However, widening participation, changes in the funding of higher education, globalisation and the speed of technology-driven change in the workplace have seen the ascendance of the graduate employability agenda over the last 20 years. The higher education sector is now a highly competitive environment where universities are measured through a growing number of metrics, the data from which is easily accessible to potential customers looking to invest in an experience that will offer competitive advantage in the jobs market. Universities have had to respond and adapt to this cultural shift and this study explores the perspectives of stakeholder groups at the centre of this change process.

The strength of applying the chosen methodology was that issues affecting the wider higher education sector could be explored in depth through the analysis of a particular discipline. The research carried out for this thesis offers a unique insight into the perspectives of individuals working at a policy level, academics, students and employers in the context of a particular highly vocational course type. Whilst Music Technology-oriented degrees can be perceived as a relatively niche area within higher education they are an example of an overtly vocational course type and the findings have the potential to resonate in other audio-oriented programmes. Some of the broader outcomes may also have significance more widely across different disciplines within the higher

education sector.

A focus on the collection of qualitative data offered the potential to gain insight into perspectives of the different stakeholder groups. Conducting semi-structured interviews whether face-to-face or via video conferencing allowed the respondents to share their insight in depth. Data was collected from individuals working at a policy level and employers in this way. Feedback was gathered from academic staff via a mixture of focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The focus group format was seen to be a useful way of opening-up the discussion and exploring differing points of view.

Data was gathered from students initially via an online questionnaire. This method allowed for the capture of the views of students, across different academic years and institutions. Issues raised via the survey data was further explored through focus groups with students. Again, the focus group format proved a useful way of stimulating debate.

## **5.2 Contribution to Knowledge**

There are several ways in which this research contributes to a greater understanding of the issues around the enhancement of graduate employability and provides original contributions to this field of knowledge.



The first contribution relates to the perceived disconnect in the perceptions of one of the stakeholder groups with regard to employability. Whilst established theory suggests that there is a lack of clarity in terms of the attributes employers require when recruiting graduates (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2009), evidence gathered through this research offers new insight into the limited perceptions expressed by students studying Music Technology-oriented degree courses when compared to feedback from those working at a policy level, academic staff and employers. Some students expressed a narrow view of the purpose of a university education, typically focusing on the perceived competitive advantage of having a degree. Taking a utilitarian view of the value a degree experience can feed into a passive approach to education. Feedback from students for this study suggests that they do not place as high a value on transferable skills as the other stakeholder groups. Such a disconnect can lead to disenchantment with elements of programmes that are overtly related to employability.

Evidence gathered for this study would suggest that students need to have a greater awareness of the realities of business in the context of graduate recruitment and the risk involved in investment in human resources in particular. The findings indicate that students would benefit from greater industrial awareness which could be perceived to have implications for pedagogy.

The second contribution relates to evidence of scepticism and cynicism drawn from across three of the four stakeholder groups; academics, employers and students with regard to the enhancement of graduate employability.

Feedback from academic staff highlighted concerns over the credibility of schemes designed to enhance employability. Lees (2002) underlined the importance of staff commitment for the success of any changes within the curriculum in higher education. In the context of this particular course type academics at different institutions expressed concern that a focus on enhancing employability could be at the expense of core teaching. A lack of genuine commitment can serve to undermine the success of new approaches.

Employers also expressed scepticism with regard to schemes designed to capture and reward attributes perceived to reflect attributes aligned to graduate employability.

Whilst industrial experience is widely perceived as beneficial to the enhancement of graduate employability (Harvey, 2003), evidence gathered from students for this study indicated that industrial experience can lead to disillusionment in the face of perceived nepotism and disenchantment on returning to studies. In the context of Music Technology-oriented courses, industrial placements are generally perceived as a route into a highly competitive industry. Evidence of cynicism regarding the benefits of such

experiences is of importance to those involved in the management of this type of programme.

The third contribution relates to issues around communication and can be seen to have implications for university strategy. Issues are manifest in two key areas: the management of student expectations and channels of communication between employers and academics.

This study offers new knowledge in terms of the importance of managing student expectations in the context of this particular course type. In a highly competitive market, universities emphasise the benefits of their programmes to prospective students. The enhancement of graduate employability is now a key element of course marketing (Pegg et al., 2012) and universities typically espouse having close links with industry. In the context of the courses explored for this research such links can be seen to be tenuous. Not only can this give rise to student disengagement but the impact of changes in consumer law means that universities need to be consistent in the way their courses are marketed and delivered.

Evidence gathered for this study would suggest that there are also issues around communication between universities and employers. Typically, employers lack awareness of university initiatives designed to highlight particular graduate attributes. Furthermore, Harvey (2003) emphasised the need for employers to do more to articulate their needs with regard to graduate

attributes to universities and this is borne out in the findings of this study.

Evidence gathered for this research emphasises the continued need to enhance interactions between higher education and industry.

Current theory would suggest that cultural differences between higher education and industry are a key barrier to closer collaboration (Hogarth et al., 2007; Lambert, 2003; Wedgwood, 2008; Wilson, 2012). This study offers insight into this issue in the context of Music Technology-oriented courses. Employers raised their concerns over language barriers and perceptions that whilst the input of industry professionals is welcomed by universities, feedback from such specialists is often ignored.

Discussions focused on the need to bridge cultural differences through greater sensitivity between academics and employers. The Lambert Review (2003) espoused the virtues of informal interactions between industry and academia and evidence from this study provides new insight into the potential benefits of such approaches. Such an emphasis on the advantages of informal interactions and suggestions as to how this may be achieved have the potential to resonate more widely beyond the particular discipline focus of this research.

### **5.3 Implications of Findings - Summary**

The implications of the findings of this research are centred on issues around the credibility of approaches for the enhancement of graduate employability,

the improvement of channels of communication and the raising of cultural awareness across the stakeholder groups.

In terms of defining employability, whilst differences in emphasis between the four stakeholder groups are inevitable based on their particular perspectives and priorities, the evidence gathered through this study would suggest that students have the vaguest understanding of the concept.

If students are not fully informed as to generic concepts of employability and any nuances related to their particular career aspirations, they may not appreciate the relevance of aspects of employability that may be embedded in their course curriculum. Students need to gain an appreciation of the perspectives of employers and in particular the importance of enhancing transferable skills in order that they might perceive the value of their learning in this area. Moreover, it is crucial that students perceive the worth of participating in extracurricular activity that may serve to support their future job applications.

Students can have a narrow view of the purpose of a university education, typically focusing on the perceived competitive advantage of having a degree. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on enhancing students' understanding of employability and this can be facilitated by contextualising the learning to their own programmes of study and potential career paths. Offering students a safe environment in which they can develop an appreciation of the industrial

context of their studies alongside their particular subject knowledge has the potential to enhance engagement.

Students need to be supported as they develop their own graduate identities. Such identities emerge through experience and exposure to professional roles and possibilities. Whilst it is understandable that upon embarking on a course, students may view a degree as another part of the qualifications continuum from levels 2 and 3, the onus is on academics to underline the shift in emphasis at levels 4, 5 and 6 towards students taking ownership of their own personal development.

Whilst initiatives designed to reward students for the development of skills related to employability may be beneficial, there is concern that such an approach, whilst advocating active engagement, if not carefully managed can lead to a passive approach. Students may collect 'tokens' that indicate the enhancement of particular attributes and skills without the empowerment and commitment to personal development that such a scheme might advocate. The implementation of such schemes needs to be inclusive and designed in a way that allows all students the opportunity to benefit. Furthermore, the proliferation of such awards may prove difficult for employers to process and this needs to be carefully considered at a policy level.

Although employers should be encouraged to see the benefits of developing links with higher education institutions, the onus is on individual universities to

instigate mutually beneficial on-going partnerships. Whilst communication technology is seen to be useful, companies respond to personal, informal interactions and although there is substantial overhead to such an approach it offers the opportunity for the breaking down of cultural barriers and facilitates innovative collaboration.

Companies need to be aware of the benefits of engagement with HEIs beyond supporting graduate recruitment. The findings of this study would suggest that companies are an underutilised resource for universities; employers are enthusiastic to share their expertise and are prepared to invest time and human resources in the development of collaborative projects. Universities need to take steps to support more proactive engagement with industry from their academic staff.

Employers also need to be more proactive in their relationships with HEIs. This is a dynamic environment and employers can take a more active role in shaping the future of university/employer interactions. Feedback from this study would suggest that employers are prepared to share innovative ideas for the enhancement of collaborative partnerships between universities and companies.

Data collected for this research would indicate that although brokerage is perceived as having a positive impact on the enhancement of collaboration

between universities and companies, awareness of organisations that offer such effective brokerage is lacking.

Whilst communication channels with employers could be enhanced, more fundamental issues have been raised in terms of how courses are marketed to students. The management of students' expectations is crucial to sustaining credible approaches to the enhancement of graduate employability. Although under pressure to recruit new students in a highly competitive market, universities need to present a realistic representation of their industrial partnerships, the realities of the graduate marketplace and the opportunities for interactions with industry professionals in the context of a particular course.

Higher education has always been subject to external pressures, in particular government interference in its activities but the rate and extent of change across the sector has been profound over the last 25 years. Changes to the fees structure and the growth in student numbers have been key catalysts for change. The longer term impact of some of these changes may now be becoming apparent. For instance, the attitudes of parents who experienced a university education over this period may influence the advice they give their children about the value of such an experience when balanced against the level of debt that a degree now entails.

Employers highlight their need for graduates with a mature approach, experience of the workplace and the ability to manage conflicting demands. Part



time and mature students may have particular strengths in these areas and yet whilst widening participation remains a mantra in higher education, changes across the sector have seen a steep fall in part time and mature student numbers (OFFA, 2016).

The findings of this study would indicate the continued commercialisation of higher education in the UK, not only with regard to universities competing for applicants but also in terms of the extent to which universities are prepared to compete with employment agencies and perhaps other HEIs to ensure that it is their graduates that are securing the best jobs.

Wedgewood (2008) talks of a 'new tradition' in higher education, a cohesive developmental approach to intellectual development in the context of employment. The findings of this study would suggest this holistic approach may be supported by a focus on community. In the context of Music Technology-oriented degree courses there is the potential to develop a community of students, academics, alumni and employers that can serve as a safe environment for the exploration of possible career paths and the enhancement of confidence as students develop their graduate identities. For instance, the involvement of the alumni in the role of mentors can be both inspirational and informative to undergraduates. Mutually beneficial, ongoing, dynamic partnerships between universities and companies can serve to breakdown cultural differences and offer the potential for long-term partnerships that are not reliant on individual relationships. In order to ensure

the credibility and reputation of individual courses such partnerships need to be transparent to all stakeholders.

## **5.4 Future Research**

Future research in this area could explore stakeholder perspectives in the context of different course types. It would be useful to consider the extent to which the findings of this study may resonate in other disciplines.

The findings of this research would suggest that students and employers would welcome more informal interactions. This study underlines the need for more research as to how universities may best engage with employers.

It would be useful to explore the experiences of subgroups within the groups of stakeholders; SMEs vs larger organisations, working class students vs middle class students, academics across 'Russell Group' and 'new' universities. Whilst cultural differences have been discussed as part of this study, capturing, exploring and comparing the experiences of particular social groups would be beneficial.

Further research could focus on the role of the academic in this dynamic environment. It would be valuable to consider the attitudes of academics to the enhancement of graduate employability across various disciplines and types of universities.

Research could be carried out into stakeholder perceptions as to how they perceive higher education evolving in the future and to explore the extent to which the views of those working at a policy level, academics, students and employers may converge.

It is important to explore the impact of the student as consumer, particularly in light of changes to consumer law as it relates to higher education.

Approaches to the auditing of higher education in the UK is a controversial and dynamic area and it would be useful to explore the perspectives of stakeholders.

## **5.5 Conclusion: Achieving the Aims of the Research**

Research carried out for this thesis contributes new knowledge to the complex issues related to the enhancement of graduate employability. This study explores the impact of drivers for change across higher education in the context of a niche course type. Whilst such an approach limits the potential for generalisability, this highly focused study has allowed the perceptions of key stakeholders to be compared and analysed. The findings offer new insight into the challenges faced by all four stakeholder groups as they look to adapt and prosper in a highly dynamic environment.

Respondents were generous with their time and a commitment to explore innovative practice was evident, particularly in terms of the feedback obtained from employers.

The purpose of the thesis was to add to the body of research knowledge and inform current debate around the enhancement of graduate employability. I consider the evidence gathered through this research to be a resource that gives voice to stakeholder groups and allows for greater understanding which may be of potential benefit particularly with regard to improving communication across the stakeholder groups.

I have gained great insight from the process which has informed my own practice and influenced approaches within my own institution.

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## APPENDIX A. Ethical Approval Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK  
Institute of  
EDUCATION

**Application for Ethical Approval for Research Degrees**

**(MA by research, MPHIL/PhD, EdD)**

Name of student – Roy Priest

MA	EdD	PhD
By research		

Project title - Enhancing Graduate Employability: A study of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy.

### Methodology

I envisage exploring this area from a broadly naturalistic perspective, drawing on social constructivist and interpretivist perspectives; social constructivism for the emphasis on an individual's learning that takes place through group interactions and interpretivism for the focus on developing understanding socially and experientially.

Centred on two exploratory case studies, the research will follow a qualitative approach to data gathering in order to capture a range of subjective perspectives.

This research will follow a two-case comparative case study design facilitating the capture and cross comparison of a range of perspectives. The focus for each of the two case studies will be a Higher Education Institution (H.E.I). Data will be gathered from staff and students within the institutions but also broadly affiliated employers and individuals from organisations that influence HEI policy.

In order to encourage open discussion I am looking to use focus groups as one of the methods for gathering data from students and academic staff. It is important to treat these groups separately as academic staff might feel inhibited in acknowledging shortcomings in the implementation of policy in front of 'paying customers'. Conversely, students may feel more comfortable discussing their views with their peer group.

Further input from academic staff along with the views of employers and policy experts will be gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, typically in their workplace. Remote video conferencing may be employed as an alternative where necessary (with the consent of the individual participant).

Throughout the process verbal data will be captured using a digital recorder with the consent of those involved. Non-verbal responses will be captured via the taking of hand

written notes again with the consent of those involved. All individual interviews will be scheduled to last for ½ hour, focus groups for 1 hour.

Questionnaires will also be used as a method for collecting data from larger groups of students as a precursor more in-depth focus groups. It is envisaged that the questionnaires will incorporate a range of question types including open and closed and Likert Scale based designs. Questionnaires will be piloted before implementation.

Qualitative data including transcriptions of interviews will analysed with the aid of qualitative data analysis software to develop codes and capture emerging themes / deviant cases. Where appropriate, extra notes will be taken during transcription to capture nuances that might otherwise be missed using Jeffersonian Transcript Notation (1984).

Following a case study methodology it is envisaged that the process itself will be in four stages.

The initial insider-researcher pilot phase will be based at my own institution, [redacted] where I will look to draw out the issues that stakeholders themselves feel need to be explored in this study. I will hold a focus group with academic staff involved in the teaching of [redacted]. I will also hold a separate focus group with students across all years from both courses. This convenience sample will be gathered through contacting all students and seeking volunteers. I will carry out individual interviews with a small group of employers with whom I have established relationships. These interviews will either be face to face or via video conferencing technology.

Stage two will focus on gaining insight at a policy level. I will carry out face to face interviews with individuals involved in the development and implementation of government-led (or supported) initiatives related to Higher Education and employability from such organisations as

Stage three will be based on two case studies. It is envisaged that the case study will be based on music technology-orientated courses at two other institutions that have good reputations in terms of enhancing graduate employability; meaningful, on-going engagement with a range of employers, demonstrating innovative approaches to the embedding of employability throughout the undergraduate experience.

Drawing on the issues raised in the pilot study, I will explore perceptions of how policy is translated within the context of a particular course type. All students on the courses will be asked to complete online questionnaires the issues raised from which will be explored in greater depth via two focus groups. Again, this convenience sample will be assembled by contacting all students and seeking volunteers. I will also carry out individual face to face interviews (supplemented with interviews via video conferencing where necessary) with teaching staff.

Stage four will involve interviewing a range of employers with experience of employing placement students and graduates in this sector. Data will be collected via face to face interviews supplemented by interviews via video conferencing or telephone where necessary.

### Participants

Purpose	Research group	Total population	Number of respondents	Data gathering method
Initial pilot study to develop the research questions to feed into questionnaires and interview / focus group questions	Students	280	6	Focus group
	Staff	15	4	Focus group
	Employers / employment agent	50 companies with established links with the university, typically through student placements	3	Individual interviews
Gaining insight at policy level	National stakeholders	Unknown	6	Individual interviews
To gain insight from students at case study 1	Students	Approx. 75 (TBC)	Unknown	Questionnaire
To gain insight from students at case study 2	Students	Approx. 75 (TBC)	Unknown	Questionnaire
To gain further insight from students at case study 1	Students	Approx. 75 (TBC)	6	Focus group
To gain further	Students	Approx. 75	6	Focus group

insight from students at case study 2		(TBC)		
To gain insight from academic staff at case study 1	Staff	Unknown	3 – 5	Individual interviews
To gain insight from academic staff at case study 2	Staff	Unknown	3 – 5	Individual interviews
To gain insight of employers	Employers	Unknown	15 – 20	Individual interviews

All of the participants will be adults. I am not looking to gather feedback from any individuals that might be known to be vulnerable.

I will employ a mixture of sampling methods. For the initial pilot 'insider' case study I will use purposeful sampling, deliberately selecting academic staff who can offer some particular insight to the research questions. I will employ convenience sampling when sourcing the input of students for the focus groups.

With regard to employers, the initial strategy will be to take a purposeful sample, contacting employers with established formal or informal with the pilot institution or either of the case study universities. If this does not lead to a large enough sample snowball sampling may be implemented.

#### Respect for participants' rights and dignity

Participants will be assured of the confidential nature of the research gathering process and will be made fully aware of the context in which the information is being elicited. Cultural and religious values will be respected by the sensitive development of the

questions being posed. Participants will be actively involved in shaping the research questions particularly in the pilot study where they will be encouraged to offer their personal insight. Unforeseen issues may be raised and addressed at this initial stage. All participants will be given opportunities to express their views. The views of all participants across different religious and cultural backgrounds will be respected. Focus groups will be carefully managed to avoid over-dominance by particular individuals. If any individuals express reservations about participating in a focus group they will be offered the alternative of a one-to-one interview.

Individuals being approached to take part in this study will be appropriately briefed in clear, concise terms about the purpose and nature of the research and what is expected of them (including the time commitment) before being asked to sign a consent form. They will also be advised of how the findings may be used, published and made available in the future. Procedures for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality will be explained.

Potential participants will not be pressurised or made to feel obliged to participate with the research.

This issue is particularly pertinent with regard to the pilot study and my position as Programme Leader / Tutor. I will clearly explain my role will be that of a researcher and that individual's contributions or non-participation will have no bearing on their progress on their course. It will be at the discretion of the participants as to which information they choose to share with me as part of the research and what information they may choose to discuss through our existing relationship.

Any participant that wishes to withdraw from the study at any stage whether temporarily or permanently will be handled sensitively and any feedback that they may choose to provide as to why they wish to withdraw will be carefully considered.

Participants will be advised that they can request to have their contributions removed from the study at any stage prior to completion of the study without the need to provide a reason. Data related to such a request would also be destroyed upon request.

I will work to ensure that the participants are comfortable whether participating in a focus group, completing a questionnaire or being interviewed. It is anticipated that such data gathering opportunities will be conducted within a student's current educational institution or in the workplace in the case of alumni or employers.

It is not expected that the nature of the study will cause distress or unease to the participants but were this to arise, immediate actions will be taken remedy the situation.

I will recognise the contributions of the participants by thanking them at the time and through a general acknowledgment in the final thesis.

#### Privacy and confidentiality

I will make every effort to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of those involved in the study. I will respect the privacy of all research participants and will work to ensure that they do not feel obliged to divulge any information that they do not feel comfortable in sharing.

Respondents will be alerted to the use of any technical equipment such as digital sound recorders or video capture equipment. Respondents will be made aware when such equipment is to be activated and will have an opportunity to decline or agree to its use.

Participants will have access to transcripts of their interviews and their own contributions to focus groups. I will fulfil my obligations in line with the Data Protection Act 1998. All data, whether electronic or physical, will be stored in a secure environment for a period of 10 years. All items will be carefully labelled and categorised. Participants will be able to have access to personal information held about them upon request. No personal information will be passed on to third parties without written consent from individual participants.



I will be mindful to reassure all participants of the confidential nature of their involvement. All data will be carefully secured via password protected computer files during the data gathering process and subsequent analysis. Pseudonyms will be used where appropriate, corresponding lists linking actual names with aliases will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Original sound recordings will be destroyed once transcribed.

It is not expected that issues related to disclosure will arise from this study, but were an issue to arise where it might be appropriate to disclose information to appropriate authorities, I will seek advice from my supervisors.

I will take measures to publicise to all participants, through email where possible, the development of the study and ultimately when the final thesis is available and how this might be accessed. Participants will also be informed of any subsequent publications borne out of this research. The majority of participants will be sourced from within academia or will have had experience of it and should not experience any difficulties in digesting the findings of the study. However, if any individuals seek further clarification or edited extracts these will be provided.

Those involved will also be advised that they should email me (in the first instance) if they have any queries or issues that subsequently arise for them concerning their involvement in the research.

#### Consent

Voluntary informed written consent will be confirmed from each participant before involvement in the study. All participants will be given a document to sign that will offer a concise and clear overview of the research and its purpose. Before approaching individuals consent for access will also be sought from representatives of the institutions involved.

A key issue for this study, particularly in pilot phase, is my dual role as practitioner researcher and this will be made explicit to everyone approached.

#### Competence

My prior experience of gathering qualitative research data and subsequent development of my skills through training in research skills will ensure that all methods are undertaken thoughtfully, with due care and competence. Should a problem arise, I will be open with the participants and work to quickly resolve the issue.

I will approach this research objectively and will not be selective when exploring findings in order to substantiate a biased view. Credibility will be maintained through the meticulous handling of data and its accurate representation.

The approach to the analysis of my findings will be based on research into a range of previous studies and will be methodically carried out. Any limitations that become apparent will be highlighted. Any recommendations will be borne out of the evidence gathered.

The approach being taken with this research does not lend itself to generalisability but it is expected that the findings will resonate with those involved in comparable courses dealing with similar issues around employability in other H.E.I.s.

#### Protection of participants

The well-being of participants throughout the process will be paramount. Should any issues come to light I will deal with them quickly, always having the safety of those involved as a priority. Should an issue occur during an interview or focus group session I will stop the activity immediately, look to investigate the problem, liaise with my supervisors where necessary and keep the participants informed of any developments.

#### Child protection

Will a CRB check be needed? **No**

I am not looking to involve any children in my study.

#### Addressing dilemmas

Due to the nature of the study it is not expected that the research will lead to any ethical dilemmas but were an issue to arise that I was unable to resolve independently I seek advice from my supervisors.

#### Misuse of research

Throughout the data gathering process all evidence will be stored securely. Were any aspect of the final thesis to be subsequently published this would only be with my consent and through reputable channels such as peer reviewed journals. Were any problems to arise subsequently I would pursue any misuse or misrepresentation of the data gathered.

No personal information will be passed on to third parties without written consent from individual participants.

#### Support for research participants

If sensitive issues are raised and any participant becomes upset I will stop the interview or focus group session. Where appropriate I will encourage the individual/s to provide some feedback as to the nature of the problem in order to avoid such issues from recurring. If the problem is of a more serious nature I will seek guidance from my supervisors.

#### Integrity

Incentives are not going to be used to encourage involvement but overall, the research design is such that the participants will be made aware of the wider benefits to their involvement in terms of improving issues related to student employability in the future. Participants will also have an active role in shaping the research itself, particularly in the first phase.

The accuracy of data will be of paramount importance. Copies of individual interview transcripts will be made available to individual participants upon request and any issues raised will be acted upon accordingly.

Similarly, focus group participants will be able to view transcripts of their individual contributions upon request.

#### Attribution of Authorship

Author, Roy Priest

#### Other issues

Issues have been covered in previous sections.

#### References

Jefferson, G. (1984) 'Transcription Notation' in J. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds), *Structures of Social Interaction*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

Signed

Research student *ROY PRIEST*

Date *10.5.13*

Supervisor

Date *20.5.13*

#### Action

## **APPENDIX B. Pilot Study Presentation**

### **Enhancing Graduate Employability:**

A study of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy.

#### **Pilot Study – Overview**

- To offer a brief overview of my research
- To explain the purpose of the pilot study
- To gather feedback on the issues that should be explored as part of study
- To consider my list of indicative research questions

#### **Brief overview**

The credibility of vocationally oriented degrees rests on the university being seen to produce highly employable students that go on to graduate careers, ideally finding success in course-related employment.

With destinations data now a key success criterion against which a degree is measured and with various employability initiatives being introduced by universities, it is useful to explore these issues within the context of particular course types.

The aim of this research is to explore, in the context of Music Technology / Sound oriented degrees, stakeholder perceptions of the implementation of policy that typically espouses an integrated approach for the enhancement of graduate employability.

Employability is a contentious issue; there is no single definitive definition in the context of Higher Education. Employability can be seen as:

- ‘A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.’ (Little et al., 2006 p.25)
- ‘Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner.’ (Harvey, 2003, p.3)

Stakeholders:

- Academic staff
- Students
- Employers

- Individuals involved in the development and implementation of government-led (or supported) initiatives related to Higher Education and employability from such organisations as ....

### **Research Methodology**

In order to achieve an understanding of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy this research will follow a qualitative research methodology.

- Specifically, I will be exploring the issues in the context of Music Technology oriented degrees.
- Data will be gathered via questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with staff and students from two universities.
- Data will also be gathered from individuals working at policy level and employers.

### **Purpose of the pilot study**

- Conceptual clarification for the research design
- To facilitate the refinement of the research questions.

The purpose of this interview / focus group pilot study is not to actually answer the research questions but to consider the questions that will be asked of the participants.

### **Discussion**

- Do you have any initial reactions to the general research design?
- What issues should be explored when considering perceptions of graduate employability?
- What questions should be asked (of all stakeholders) in order to explore the ways in which employability policy is translated into university strategy?

Are there particular questions that should be pitched to:

- Academic staff
- Students
- Employers

Are there particular issues that should be raised with individuals involved in the development and implementation of government-led (or supported) initiatives?

### **Indicative questions to consider**

- What is the role of a university?
- What do you understand by 'employability' in the context of Higher Education?

- Do you think universities should work more closely with employers?
- If so, how?
- To what extent should universities prepare students for graduate employment?
- How do the stakeholders perceive the process of learning skills related to employability within the context of an undergraduate degree?
- What content would be expected within a typical university employability statement?
- How might relationships between employers and the Higher Education sector best be brokered?
- What should be the nature of university / employer collaboration?
- What should be the nature of relationships between individual universities and particular companies?
- Can you offer any insight into initiatives or organisations that are focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers?
- How can a disparate group of stakeholders best work together in the development of university policy? What practical approaches, mechanisms, technologies, environments might enhance the collaboration of a range of stakeholders in the development of university policy with regard to employability?

And finally

- Are there any other questions that should be asked of the stakeholders?

## **APPENDIX C. Consent Form**



### **CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW / FOCUS GROUP – RESEARCH OVERVIEW**

#### **Thesis title:**

Enhancing Graduate Employability: A study of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy.

#### **Name of Researcher:**

Roy Priest

#### **Background and Purpose:**

I am @@ a Senior Lecturer at a UK university and in my role as a programme leader I manage two courses ## and have a particular interest in graduate employability. I am carrying out research into perceptions of employability through a part time PhD.

The credibility of vocationally oriented degrees rests on the university being seen to produce highly employable students that go on to graduate careers, ideally finding success in course-related employment. With destinations data now a key success criterion against which a degree is measured and with various employability initiatives being introduced by universities, it is imperative to explore these issues within the context of particular course types.

The aim of this research is to explore, in the context of Music Technology oriented degrees, stakeholder perceptions of the implementation of policy that typically espouses an integrated approach for the enhancement of graduate employability.

You have been approached as someone in a position to offer particular insight into this subject and I would appreciate it if I could interview you.

#### **Data Gathering Procedures:**

Discussions will be instigated through a one-to-one interview either face-to-face or via video conferencing technology or through a focus group. One-to-



one interviews will last no longer than an hour; focus groups no longer than ninety minutes. With your permission I will capture a digital audio recording solely for the purposes of accurately transcribing the discussion. The digital audio / video recordings and subsequent transcriptions will be stored securely.. All data, whether electronic or physical, will be stored in a secure environment for a period of 10 years.

**Potential Risks:**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

I will protect the confidentiality and anonymity and respect the privacy of all research participants. I will work to ensure that they do not feel obliged to divulge any information that they do not feel comfortable in sharing.

Participants will be able to have access to personal information held about them upon request. No personal information will be passed on to third parties without written consent from individual participants. Individual participant's involvement in this study will be confidential. Pseudonyms will be used throughout; corresponding lists linking actual names with aliases will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Original sound recordings will be destroyed once transcribed.

**Withdrawal of Participation:**

Should you decide at any time during the interview or discussion that you no longer wish to participate, you may withdraw your consent without prejudice.

**Cost Benefits to you:**

There are no direct costs involved with participation; also there are no direct benefits to you. However, your participation will contribute to an on-going and dynamic debate around employability in the context of Higher Education. It is intended that my thesis will lead to presentations at conferences and publication in academic journals.

**Requests for more information:**

You are welcome to ask more questions about the study at any time. Please contact me via

**CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW / FOCUS GROUP**

**Study title:** Enhancing Graduate Employability: A study of stakeholder perceptions of employability policy and its translation into university strategy.

**Name of Researcher:** Roy Priest

**I confirm that I have read the research overview and understand the details of the research.** I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions about the project and I may keep the document for future reference.

**I agree to take part in the above study and am willing to:**

- Be interviewed for up to 60 minutes: Yes / No (please circle)
- Partake in focus group discussion of up to 90 minutes: Yes / No (please circle)
- Allow the interview to be recorded using a digital sound recorder or video capture: Yes / No (please circle)
- Allow the interview to be transcribed: Yes / No (please circle)

**I understand that my information will be held and processed for the following purposes:**

Analysis of research data as part of the development of a PhD thesis and possible future presentation at conferences and publication in academic journals.

**Any information which might potentially identify me will not be used in published material.**

**I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without being penalised or disadvantaged in anyway.**

**I agree to participate in the study as outlined to me.**

Name of Participant  
Signature

Date

Researcher  
Signature

Date

## **APPENDIX D. Semi-Structured Interviews / Focus Groups – Questions Framework**

I would like to start with a philosophical question:

What is the purpose of a university education?

How would you define graduate employability?

What attributes do you think employers want from their graduates and to what extent are they currently getting this?

To what extent is it the responsibility of universities to prepare students for graduate employment?

How do you perceive the process of learning skills related to employability within the context of an undergraduate degree? *(Should these aspects be embedded within modules, delivered in specific modules, through work experience and / or placements?)*

To what extent should student attributes related to employability feed into certification upon completion of a degree course? Should these aspects appear on a student's transcript upon completion of a course (HEAR)?

### **University / employer collaboration**

Can you offer any insight as to how universities have changed (over the last 20 years perhaps) with specific regard to graduate employability?

To what extent do employers want to get involved with the shaping the future of Higher Education?

More specifically, to what extent do employers want to work alongside universities or other agencies in the development of policies related to employability?

Government reviews have talked of the importance greater interaction between business and higher education. How should relationships between employers and universities best be brokered?

What should be the nature of university / employer collaboration? (research, teaching perhaps through guest lectures, course development, module development, assessment strategy).

Are there issues around the overhead for employers as they look to enhance relationships with a number of universities?

How can the voice of small businesses best be heard? Is there an issue with regard to over-dominance by larger organisations?

How can a disparate group of stakeholders such as industry professionals, academics, students and those involved in policy development best work together?

How can closer relationships between universities and employers best be operationalised?

What practical approaches, mechanisms, technologies (such as video conferencing), environments might enhance the collaboration of a range of stakeholders in the development of university policy?

Do you have any comments regarding the balance between formal and informal networks?

Could you share your experience of Employer Liaison Groups (ELG)?

Do you think employers are sufficiently aware of changes related to employability that have been rolled out across Higher Education? (E.g. HEAR / Skillset)

How should employability-based initiatives best be marketed to employers?

### **Organisation-specific questions**

Can you offer any insight into your company's involvement in any initiatives or organisations that are focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers?

### **Social / Political context**

I would like to ask you a few questions related to the way in which graduate employability has moved ever more centre stage in recent years.

Why is this issue more prominent now than in the past?

Is there any link between the abandonment of the target of 50% of young people going to university, the current state of the economy and the rise of the graduate employability agenda?

To what extent is the employability agenda a symptom of the fight for survival currently going on across HE institutions?

Is the focus on graduate employability an example of universities losing their confidence in their traditional role in the face of changes to funding, ever greater scrutiny of the performance of individual courses by a range of indicators related to the value that is added by studying a particular undergraduate course?

Is a focus on employability a symptom of difficult economic times?

Do you foresee that employability will have such prominence in Higher Education in an economic climate where the demand for graduates outstrips the supply?

**Final thoughts**

Do you have any further thoughts regarding how current policy related to graduate employability, translated into university practices is perceived by industry?

Thank you

## APPENDIX E. Survey

### Graduate Employability (published)

My name is Roy Priest, I

I have a particular interest in graduate employability and am carrying out research into this area as part of a PhD via the University of Warwick.

- The aim of the research is to explore, in the context of sound-related science degrees, stakeholder perceptions of policy across the Higher Education sector that typically espouses closer partnerships between universities and employers in order to enhance graduate employability.
- My research has involved the gathering of feedback at a policy level. I am now interviewing employers in this sector and exploring the issues further via case studies; BSc Music Technology orientated courses at two universities.

The intention of this survey is to get a deeper understanding of some of the issues from the perspective of students. All respondents will be anonymised and my findings will be made available upon the completion of my research. This questionnaire will be followed up with a focus group where I intend to discuss the issues raised by the responses to this questionnaire with a small group of students.



**1. Which university are you studying at?**

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

**\*2. What is your current year of study?**

- ☐ Year 1  
☐ Year 2  
☐ Currently on placement  
☐ Year 3 (i.e. you did not undertake a placement year)  
☐ Year 4 (i.e. you have returned from a placement year)

Other (please specify)

**\*3. What is the purpose of a University education?**

**\*4. What do you understand by 'graduate employability'?**

## Graduate Employability (published)

**\*5. What evidence of skills / knowledge do you think employers want from graduates?  
From the following list please rank the attributes that you think employers are looking  
for from graduates. The most important attribute should be given a score of 1.**

<input type="text"/>	Problem solving / analytical ability
<input type="text"/>	Knowledge and skills borne out of a specific degree
<input type="text"/>	Numeracy
<input type="text"/>	Written communication skills
<input type="text"/>	Presentation skills
<input type="text"/>	Previous experience
<input type="text"/>	Business awareness
<input type="text"/>	IT skills
<input type="text"/>	Degree classification
<input type="text"/>	Oral communication skills

## Graduate Employability (published)

**\*6. What personal attributes do you think employers want from graduates? From the following list please rank the attributes that you think employers are looking for from graduates. The most important attribute should be given a score of 1.**

<input type="text"/>	Willingness to learn
<input type="text"/>	Reliability
<input type="text"/>	Confidence
<input type="text"/>	Ability to cope with uncertainty / under pressure
<input type="text"/>	Interpersonal skills
<input type="text"/>	Creativity
<input type="text"/>	Ability to work as part of a team
<input type="text"/>	Desire to achieve / motivation
<input type="text"/>	Leadership
<input type="text"/>	Initiative

**7. Are there any other attributes that are not on the previous lists that you think are important to employers when recruiting graduates?**

**\*8. To what extent is it the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability? Please CHOOSE ONE COMMENT from the following list.**

- ☐ Preparing students in terms of graduate employability is a fundamental university responsibility.
- ☐ Whilst a university may offer some guidance to students in terms of graduate employability this is not their central mission.
- ☐ Preparing students in terms of graduate employability is a peripheral university responsibility.
- ☐ It is not the responsibility of a university to prepare students in terms of graduate employability.

**\*9. How should students develop skills related to employability within the context of an undergraduate degree? CHOOSE ONE OR MORE responses from the following list.**

- ☐ Skills related to employability should be embedded across a range of modules throughout the course.
- ☐ Skills related to employability should be delivered in stand-alone, course-specific modules.
- ☐ Skills related to employability should be delivered via interactions with professionals from industry working in areas related to the course.
- ☐ The development of skills related to employability should be provided via generic sessions delivered by University Careers staff.

## Graduate Employability (published)

**\*10. There are initiatives in Higher Education to supplement the traditional degree classification awarded to graduates to include a wider range of skills related to employability. For instance, 'The Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) provides a single comprehensive record of a learner's achievement [...] including academic work, extra-curricular activities, prizes and employability awards, voluntary work and offices held in student union clubs and societies that have been verified by the institution. [...] its main purpose is to capture the totality of a student's performance and to enable a student to represent a wide range of their achievements to employers and postgraduate tutors, thereby enhancing their employability. (HEAR, n.d.)'**

**Do you think non-academic achievement typically related to transferable skills, should be recognised in a degree transcript?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Please add a brief comment to explain your answer

**\*11. Do you think employer representatives should have an input into the development and / or delivery of undergraduate degrees?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Please add a brief comment to explain your answer

## Graduate Employability (published)

**\*12. What should be the nature of university / employer collaboration? Please select ONE OR MORE comments from the following list.**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The development of opportunities for short term unpaid work experience  | <input type="checkbox"/> University and employer collaboration in the development of individual courses    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The development of opportunities for year-long paid placements  | <input type="checkbox"/> University and employer collaboration in the development of individual modules    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Joint research projects   | <input type="checkbox"/> University and employer collaboration in the development of assessment strategies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employer involvement in the delivery of teaching perhaps through guest lectures or online interaction with students |  |

Other (please specify)

**\*13. Do you have any concerns regarding greater employer involvement in degree course development and delivery?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Please add a brief comment to explain your answer

**14. What practical approaches, technologies (such as video conferencing) and environments for meeting might enhance the collaboration of students, academics and employers working together in the development of university strategy related to graduate employability?**

**\*15. Are you aware of any initiatives or organisations that are focused on creating closer links between universities and graduate employers?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

If you have answered 'yes' could you give examples

## Graduate Employability (published)

**\* 16. Do you think that the rise in prominence of graduate employability is linked to increases in the cost of course fees?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Please add a brief comment to explain your answer

**\* 17. It has been suggested that the focus on the development of graduate employability is related to the current economic climate. Do you think that graduate employability will have such prominence in Higher Education in an improved economic climate where the demand for graduates outstrips the supply?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Please add a brief comment to explain your answer

Thank you. Your input is much appreciated.

## APPENDIX E. Units of Analysis

	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Data gathering method</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
Pilot Study	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Midlands	Focus group	4	May 2013
	Academic staff, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Midlands	Focus group	4	June 2013
	Employer, computer games studio, Midlands	Individual interview, face to face	1	June 2013
Stakeholder Group 1, Policy level	Policy level	Individual interviews, face to face	6	June 2013 – April 2014
	Policy level	Individual interviews, video conferencing	1	June 2013 – April 2014
	Policy level	Individual interviews, telephone	1	June 2013 – April 2014
Stakeholder Group 2, Students	Students, 'Plate glass' university, South East	Survey	9	November – December 2013
	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Survey	13	November – December 2013
	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Midlands	Survey	1	November – December 2013
	Students, 'Russell Group' university, Yorkshire	Survey	5	November – December 2013
	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Yorkshire	Survey	34	November – December 2013
	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Yorkshire	Focus group	2 (final year)	December 2013
	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Focus group	25 (year 2)	March 2014
	Students, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Focus group	7 (final year)	March 2014
Stakeholder Group 3, Academic staff	Staff, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Yorkshire	Focus group	3	December 2013
	Staff, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Focus group	8	March 2014
	Staff, 'Plate glass' university, South East	Individual interview, video conferencing	1	April 2014
Stakeholder Group 4, Employers	Employers	Individual interviews, face to face	10	October 2013 - June 2014
	Employers	Individual interviews, video conferencing	4	October 2013 - June 2014



## APPENDIX F. Key for Interviewees Quoted in Findings

Interviewees	Citation
Manager, industry skills body for the creative sector, South East	Policy Level 1, industry skills body
Manager, publicly funded, industry-led organisation providing guidance on issues related to skills and employment, South East	Policy Level 2, publicly funded, industry-led organisation
Manager, network organisation focused on recording achievement in Further and Higher education, North West	Policy Level 3, network organisation
University management, post-1992 / 'Modern' university. Director of regional enterprise centre, North West	Policy Level 4, university management
Management, national graduate recruitment body, Midlands	Policy Level 5, graduate recruitment
University management, 'red brick' university, chair of national higher education groups, Midlands	Policy Level 6, university management, national bodies
Management, post-1992 / 'Modern' university, South East	Policy Level 7, university management
Management, 'Plate glass' university, Midlands	Policy Level 8, university management
Academic staff, university, post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Yorkshire	Academic Staff 1
Academic staff, 'Plate glass' university, South East	Academic Staff 2
Academic staff, post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Academic Staff 3
Final Year, ex-placement university students, post-1992 / 'Modern' university, Yorkshire	Students 1, final year, ex-placements
Final Year university student, Post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Students 2, final year
Second Year university student, post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Students 3, second year
Manager, live events equipment hire specialists, Midlands	Employer 1, live events sound specialists
Manager, corporate live events venue, Midlands	Employer 2, corporate live events
Manager, professional audio product manufacturers, South East	Employer 3, audio products manufacturer
Artistic Director, theatre, South East	Employer 4, theatre
Manager, professional audio product manufacturers, Midlands	Employer 5, audio products manufacturer

Consultant, audio products specialists, London	Employer 6, audio products specialists
Manager, hire company specialising in event oriented production technologies, Midlands	Employer 7, specialist live events equipment hire
Recording studio proprietor / academic, Yorkshire / post-1992 / 'Modern' university, North West	Employer 8, recording studio owner and academic
Manager, company specialising in audio services to the live events industry, Midlands	Employer 9, live events sound specialists
Managing Director, company providing specialist services to music festivals, Midlands	Employer 10, specialist support for live events
TV Producer / Director. Director of a company specialising in consultancy, training and facilitation, South West	Employer 11, broadcast industry, SME
Manager, technology operations, national broadcaster, North West	Employer 12, broadcast industry, national broadcaster
Managing Director, broadcast sound specialist, Midlands	Employer 13, broadcast industry, SME
Managing Director, live events production company, South West	Employer 14, live events production